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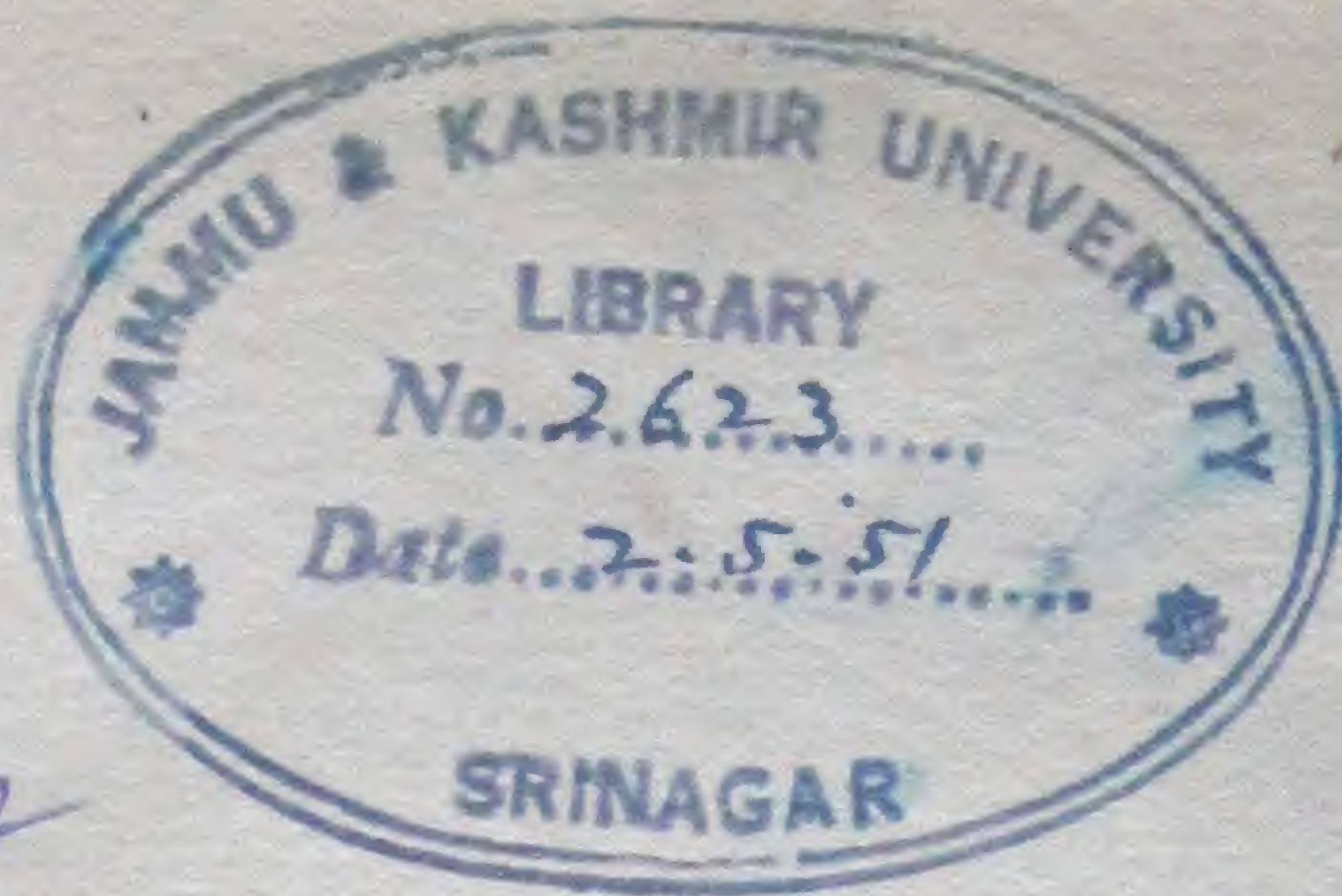
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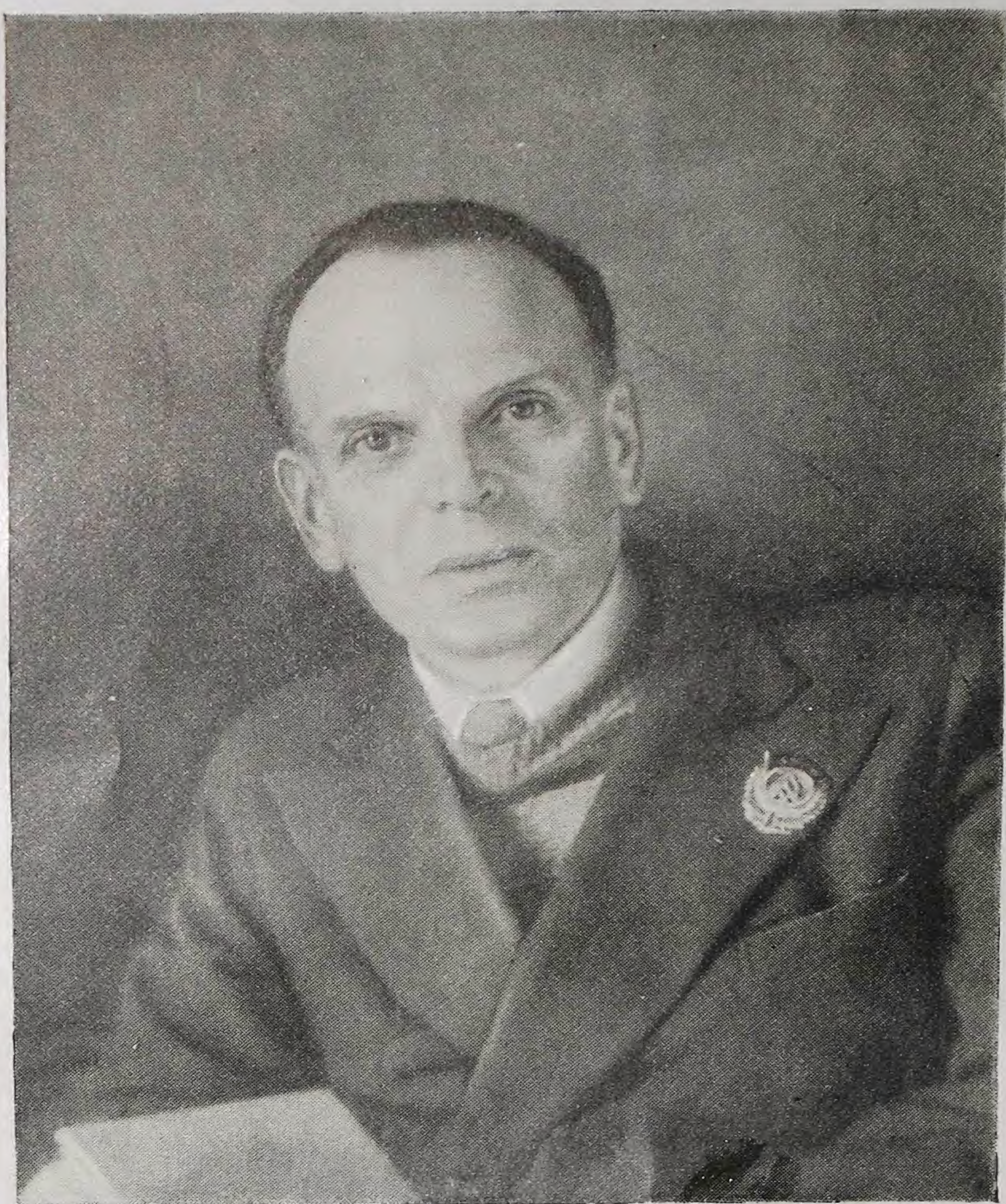














*Konstantin Paustovsky*

**SELECTED  
STORIES**



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Konstantin Paustovsky was born in 1892 in Moscow. His father was a railroad employee.

He spent his childhood in the Ukraine, where he lived part of the time in a village and part of the time in Kiev.

On graduating from *gymnasium*, Paustovsky entered Kiev University. Later he transferred to Moscow University, but the outbreak of the First World War interrupted his studies. For almost the entire duration of the war he served at the front as a stretcher-bearer.

The writer tried his hand at many occupations: he was a streetcar motorman and conductor in Moscow, a hospital orderly, an iron and steel worker in the South, a fisherman on the Azov Sea, a seaman, a teacher of Russian literature, and, finally, a journalist. His aim was to learn as much as possible about people and various occupations.

Paustovsky's first story was published in 1911 in a Kiev magazine, and his first book came out in 1926. Ever since then he has devoted himself wholly to writing. He is the author of about forty books, besides numerous short stories, sketches and articles published in various periodicals. His writing has won him the Order of the Red Banner of Labour and the "For Val-



orous Labour" Medal, both awarded by the Soviet Government.

During the Great Patriotic War the writer was a war correspondent on the Southern Front.

The present volume includes Konstantin Paustovsky's two most popular books (*The Gulf of Kara-Bugaz* and *Colchis*), and several short stories.



THE GULF  
OF  
KARA-BUGAZ







## LIEUTENANT ZHEREBTSOV'S ERROR

"No other part of the Caspian seaboard is so definitely and completely barren."

G. Karelin (noted traveller).

"I HASTEN to inform you that I have complied with your request and am bringing you two very rare birds which I shot down in the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz during our voyage. Our ship's quartermaster took it upon himself to stuff the birds, and they now stand in my cabin. They are Egyptian birds, called flamingos, and are covered with pink feathers of exceptional beauty. Their presence on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea is a puzzle to me, since hitherto Africa was known to be their sole habitat. The circumstances linked with the shooting of these birds are quite remarkable and merit a comprehensive description.

"As you already know, this spring of 1847 I received orders to make a most thorough survey and description of the shores of the Caspian Sea, for which purpose the steam corvette *Volga*, fitted out with engines of English make, was put at my disposal.

"We sailed from Baku to Astrakhan and thence to Guryev, from which point we proceeded south past unexplored and desolate shores. I shall not encumber you unnecessarily with a description of them.

"I shall touch only on the amazing view presented by the shore outlying the Mangyshlak Peninsula. Here Asia rises abruptly out of the trans-Ural desert as a black tableland. It stretches away in a solid wall to the east, where mirages blot out of sight everything save sun, sand and clay.



The tableland is inaccessible. According to the tales of the nomads, it may be ascended in one place only—along the dried bed of a stream. It juts a sheer black and brown cliff into the sea. During all my long years of peregrinations I have never seen a coast so forbidding, and menacing, as it were, to navigators.

“All the way to Kinderli Bay we sailed in the teeth of a *moryana* carrying clouds of dust and a smell of sulphur from the deserts, where, it is said, there are sulphur hills. This rough south wind impedes breathing, and I believe it is harmful to all living things.

“I myself experienced a sickly sweet taste in my mouth, and the sailors spat so vigorously that the bosuns were driven to genuine despair: the entire deck was covered with spittle and had to be swabbed three times a day. I must explain that this was due to an old sailors’ superstition against spitting into the sea lest it take offence and give the ship a stiff shaking-up. In many things the sailors still abide by the traditions of Christopher Columbus’ day and are not easily swayed by the influence of such an enlightened century as ours.

“After a short stay in Kinderli Bay, where for the first time in two months’ cruising we feasted our eyes on lush green grass—a miracle in these salty regions—we set sail for the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz in a violent north wind. This wind likewise has some remarkable qualities. It brings cold, clear weather, and a sensation of hollowness about the whole body, as though it has been deprived of its blood and bones. This lightness is not in the least pleasant; quite the contrary, it is exceedingly painful and causes the ears to ring and the head to swim.

“While in Kinderli Bay we drew relatively fresh water from some ancient wells. But toward nightfall the water became brackish. I reflected upon this phenomenon at great length and made a few tests with the help of my assistant. We found that the water becomes brackish when left in a vessel that is partly or completely uncovered. From this I concluded that the air in these latitudes is filled with a very fine salt dust which settles in carelessly covered barrels or open buckets. By the same phenomenon I account for the



extraordinary misty grey colour of the sky. Thick strata of the atmosphere are filled with salt, as a result of which the sun acquires a dim, slightly silvery hue, though it scorches unmercifully.

"In the Gulf of Kinderli we saw the remains of fortifications built in Peter the First's day by General Bekovich at the outset of his mad march on India. They say he wintered here with his periwigged army and from here moved on to Khorezm, where the Khivans perfidiously beheaded him and used his skin to make war drums.

"Near the fortifications, which were densely overgrown with wormwood, we found three mulberry trees of such venerable age that their pith looked like old silver.

"I should like to point out to you that the medieval English traveller Jenkinson, if he is not lying, informs us that he saw—either on the Gulf of Kinderli or on the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz—a huge walled city with minarets and caravanserais, smothered in greenery and washed abundantly by fresh springs. I believe that Jenkinson was right, for not far from the Gulf of Kinderli we came across the foundations of massive buildings that had cracked and were crumbling to dust from old age and the heat.

"From Kinderli we proceeded to the Kara-Bugaz in a state of anxiety and dissatisfaction. There were many reasons for this. We had to sail into a gulf that no one before us had entered. About this gulf we had heard many frightening tales while still in Baku. The captain of the corvette *Zodiac* had told me the story about the time, in 1825, when his corvette was at the disposal of Academician Eichwald. The academician had ordered him to weigh anchor at the entrance to the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz so that he might explore it. But the captain, not wishing to risk his ship, categorically refused. His fears were aroused by the fact that the waters of the Caspian Sea were rushing with unheard-of speed and impetus into the gulf; it was as though they were being impelled into a bottomless chasm. This phenomenon, by the way, explains the name of the gulf: Kara-Bugaz is the Turkmenian for 'black mouth.' Like a mouth the gulf unceasingly sucks in water from the sea. The latter circumstance has given rise to the surmise that at the eastern shore of the gulf



the water rushes in a powerful subterranean torrent into the Aral Sea or into the Arctic Ocean.

"Our renowned and courageous traveller Karelin gave me quite an unflattering written testimonial concerning the Kara-Bugaz and warned me against entering it. According to him, it is almost impossible to get out of the gulf against the race. Moreover, the water of the gulf is corrosive; it eats away even steel objects in a short period of time.

"Not only we, the officers, knew about this, but the sailors too, who were naturally agitated and cursed the gulf up hill and down dale.

"My instructions were at all costs to map the shores of the gulf, which on a Mercator's projection marine chart were depicted as two curved lines with a gap between them. It was in extraordinary circumstances that I filled in the gap and drew up a nautical description of the gulf.

"As we drew near the Kara-Bugaz we espied a cupola of red haze, like the smoke of a small desert fire, floating over the sands. That smoke, our Turkmenian pilot told us, was rising up from the Kara-Bugaz. This discovery, no previous mention of which had ever been made, filled us with alarm and perplexity. We proceeded with extreme caution, sounding the bottom almost continuously, until we reached the barely perceptible entrance to the strait.

"The current here was very strong, and the entire strait was not unlike the Volga during the spring high waters. There was no use hesitating, since it was our bounden duty to enter that terrifying furnace of Asia. We turned our engines down to low and let ourselves be carried through the strait by the current. We cast anchor only when the blue water of the sea had given way to the dead, tin-coloured gulf water.

"A great hush reigned all round. All sounds seemed to drown in the dense water and in the heavy desert air tinted scarlet by the setting sun.

"We spent the night under steam. Since we had exhausted our supply of fresh water, we fed the boilers with gulf water. Toward morning we discovered an inch-thick layer of salt lining the walls of the boilers, although they had been air-flushed every quarter of an hour. From this circumstance



you can judge the saltiness of that gulf, which is so like the Dead Sea in Palestine.

"Our fool of a cook tried to take a swim, but the gulf would not accept him. The water tossed his legs high into the air, and try as he would, he could not sink in it. This spectacle amused the crew and somewhat raised their spirits. Toward evening the cook broke out in sores. He assured us that the gulf water was nothing but adulterated *aqua regia*.

"In the morning the grey mirror of the gulf rose before us in all its monotony. The water was not very transparent. Dead fish from the sea floated about in it. We found a great quantity of these salty dead fish on the shore. According to the sailors who tasted them, they were quite edible.

"I was amazed at the large number of birds I saw in these lifeless waters, and I soon found myself suffering from optical illusions.

"Hugging the northern shore, we reached Kara-Sukut Spit on the second day. Here we sighted extensive reddish strips of foam on the water. At night a storm blew up, and we noticed that the strips of foam moved with the waves.

"Struck by the unnatural colour of the foam, I had a boat lowered. We rowed over to the nearest strip of foam, some of which I scooped up. I found it teeming with the red, fine-grained spawn of crabs. I was surprised to discover spawn existing in water so caustic as this.

"I then made for a second, somewhat rosier and fluffier, strip of foam. Here something quite extraordinary happened. The foamy strip soared up into the air with a loud cackling and clumsily flapped away over our rowboat and the dumbfounded men. It was a flock of flamingos which had been sitting on the foam and feeding on the spawn.

"At Kara-Sukut we observed a countless number of wild geese and vicious pelicans, called by the local folk *babas*. I regretted very much that you were not with us on board the corvette. In my next letter I shall give you a description of the gulf itself, which is not devoid of interest.

"Yours faithfully,

Lieutenant Zherebtsov."



Through the carelessness of the addressee the second letter was lost, and a description of the gulf is to be found only in a brief report sent by Lieutenant Zherebtsov to the Hydrographic Administration. This report is written in a clipped and clear style that is fully in keeping with the character of its author, a keen and courageous man.

An extensive study of sailing directions, as well as of descriptions of nature by writers of various periods, has convinced me that there are sometimes wide divergencies in the perception of natural phenomena at different periods. The descriptions are influenced both by the profession of the author and his social position.

If I am to believe medieval writers, the landscape in their time was cruder and harsher than it is today; there was something in it suggestive of a woodcut.

The sailors of the end of the eighteenth century visualized the sea as depicted by the famous English painter Turner—stormy and tinged red by the sunsets, whereas the average Englishman of today pictures it as a very delicate blue fabric sheathed in a faint mist, that is, such as the neurasthenic and aristocratic Whistler painted it.

I have digressed somewhat in order to make it clear that in the eyes of a contemporary, myself, for example, the Kara-Bugaz is far more simple and less mysterious than Lieutenant Zherebtsov was wont to see it.

In Zherebtsov's report to the Hydrographic Administration we read:

"The Gulf of Kara-Bugaz, called by the Turkmenians 'Bitter Sea' (Aji-darya) and 'Servant of the Sea' (Kuli-darya), constitutes a vast watery expanse, exceeding that of Lake Ladoga, and almost cut off from the sea by two barren spits. The gulf lies along the same latitude as Naples, but its climate is sultry and arid.

"I skirted the shores of the gulf and charted them. The northern shore consists of jagged cliffs of salty clay and white plaster stone. It is bare of grass and trees. Bleak hills rise along the eastern shore, whereas the southern is low-lying and covered with a great number of salt lakes.

"All the shores are barren. None contain fresh water. I did not discover a single stream flowing into this truly dead sea.



"There are no convenient coves for the anchorage of ships, but this circumstance in no way hinders navigation, since the depth of the gulf is insignificant and everywhere alike. Ships may weigh anchor wherever they choose if need be.

"There are some coves, but they are so shallow that rowboats have to stop at about a cable's length from the shore, from where it takes no less than half an hour, if not more, to get to *terra firma* wading ankle-deep in the water.

"Our corvette met with no submerged rocks or reefs, and with no islands.

"On the basis of the above I am of the opinion that navigation in the gulf is quite safe. The only cause for alarm are the harsh winds which blow from the east with enviable perseverance and whip up small but steep waves.

"The gulf water is very salty and dense, which explains why the impact of its waves is much heavier than that of the waves in the sea. As distinct from the sea, however, squalls seem to find it more difficult to beat up waves in the gulf. The effect is very amusing: when the wind whips up the sea, a calm still reigns in the gulf, on the other side of a narrow sandy spit. When a storm subsides, the waves in the gulf take a long time to quieten down, and the shores shudder for hours under the heavy swell.

"One cannot with any reliability measure the altitude of heavenly bodies to ascertain latitude and longitude in the gulf, since huge salt lakes lying hidden on the shore behind narrow walls of sand produce a powerful glitter and a deflection of light rays, which is called refraction. Not far from the southern spit I observed quite a considerable refraction. The shore appeared to be a pile of jagged hills, whereas actually it is as flat as a sheet of paper.

"According to the Turkmenians, it never rains in the gulf. The rain evaporates from the broiling heat before it reaches the ground.

"As you approach the gulf, the latter appears in the form of a cupola of reddish haze which navigators have found terrifying from time immemorial. I believe that this phenomenon is to be explained by the free evaporation of the waters of the Kara-Bugaz.



"One must remember that the gulf is surrounded by a sun-baked desert and is, if one may draw such a comparison, a large boiler in which the Caspian waters keep bubbling away.

"The gulf bottom is quite remarkable: salt, and under the salt, limy clay.

"It seems to me the salt is of a special composition, different from the salt we use in cooking and in pickling.

"The swift current rushing from the sea into the gulf, which undoubtedly indicates a difference of levels in the two, is still a mystery to me.

"On the basis of the above, I permit myself to conclude that the littoral of the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz, as well as the gulf itself, holds no interest for the state.

"A stay, even of the shortest duration, in the waters of this gulf gives rise to a feeling of great loneliness and to a yearning for places green and populated. I did not come across a single person on the hundreds of miles of shoreline, and except for the bitterest of wormwood and driest of weeds I did not pluck a single blade of grass.

"Salt, sand and a scorching heat alone hold sway over these inhospitable shores and waters."

The Kirghizians were driving their herds across the Ural River from the winter pasturage to the summer grazing grounds. Their way lay through the town of Guryev, which boasted the only pontoon bridge at the lower reaches of the river.

A toll had to be paid at the bridge for the stock. Drunken, heavy-jowled officials of the army administration, their faces burned by the sun to the same rusty brown as the faded stripes and tabs on their dusty uniforms, stood at the sides of the bridge counting the livestock. The bridge bent and creaked. The officials mercilessly beat the sheep on the head with long poles to bring them to a stop for a brief moment. Then the poles were lifted, like the bars at a railroad crossing, and the sheep once more swept on toward the city in a brown avalanche. Thus, stopping the sheep every few moments, the officials were able roughly to estimate the number that passed.



To confuse the officials the Kirghizians kept pressing them to the rickety rails of the bridge with the cruppers of their vicious horses.

The dust swirled up over the Ural like a conflagration, and the adobe huts shook with the bellowing and tramping of the herds. The inhabitants of Guryev looked upon the passage of the herds through their town as an unavoidable calamity, much like a flood or a fire.

Hundreds of camels, afraid of the bridge, created huge bottlenecks at its approaches as they milled about their stubborn leaders.

Avaricious old women crawled under the bellies of the horses to pick up the camels' droppings with trembling hands. These were venders of *kizyak*.

Biblical-looking elders in muslin turbans amidst bright-coloured rags towered over the camels and blinked their bloodshot eyes: thousands of miles of roaming had burned out the pupils of their eyes and turned their faces into bags of scorched skin.

The desert kept pouring across the town from the Bokhara shore to the European, bringing with it clayey dust, the rusty colour of singed wool, and thirst. The herds lapped long at the filthy waters of the Ural with lips stained yellow with wormwood.

"A scene out of the Old Testament!" laughed Lieutenant Zherebtsov as he stepped ashore.

He had completed his description of the shores of the Caspian Sea and was stopping off at Guryev on his way back to call on the austere and esteemed traveller Karelin, who had made his home here. Zherebtsov had important business with Karelin. The corvette lay at anchor at the mouth of the Ural, where its way was blocked by a sand bar.

Sullen natives clustered round his boat. Zherebtsov raised the collar of his naval jacket to protect his snow-white shirt from the dust and addressed the nearest native, a sunburned fellow who smelled strongly of liquor.

"Do you know Karelin?"

"No, I don't."

"Grigory Silych Karelin, the traveller?"



"Oh, him?" The native brightened. "The one who travelled up and down the whole of Kirghizia? Of course!"

"Then take me to him."

Zherebtsov glanced about. He recalled the words of Pallas to the effect that there was not a better place for penal servitude in the whole of Russia than this foul-smelling town.

The hutments of grey brick and clay lay lopsidedly, like old women breathing their last. There was a smell of putrid fish and chicken droppings; the wind, too, helped matters by blowing into the eyes all sorts of rubbish, sprinkled generously with chicken down. Mean-looking old Cossack women sat on the doorsteps combing out the hair of their lazy young daughters.

"What a place that old man has chosen to live in!" Zherebtsov shrugged his shoulders. Karelin's predilection for these bleak wastes struck him as nothing short of unnatural. Zherebtsov recalled the Kara-Bugaz. "What a mucky spot this is, and what a grand, truly virginal desert lies almost right by!"

The native led Zherebtsov to the outskirts of the town, where the Ural flowed by. In the irrigated orchards, where there was not a single blade of grass under the trees—nothing save trampled clay—*chigirs* were clattering dented buckets as they swished a yellowish liquid into the *aryks*. Sleepy blindfolded oxen turned the *chigirs* with the patience of slaves.

The native came to a stop at the door of a grey frame house surrounded by black poplars. Asking first for a pipeful of tobacco, he said:

"This is it."

Zherebtsov knocked on the door. He knew that Karelin was a touchy, eccentric old fellow, and as he called on him now his respect for this explorer, who had dared to cross regions of Asia, where death was almost a foretold certainty, was mixed with a certain degree of embarrassment.

A Kirghizian manservant ushered him into a study smelling strongly of stale tobacco and leather-bound folios. Zherebtsov sat down. As he examined the stuffed steppe animals he suddenly felt how utterly trivial his business with Karelin



was. Karelin entered the room with a haste that belied his portliness. The plump hand he held out to Zherebtsov was that of an old man. His grey eyes shot a quick look through the filmy spectacles. His grey beard spread fanwise over his heavy grey jacket.

"Very glad," he said in a husky voice, "to see you safely back from your arduous cruise."

Zherebtsov bowed.

"I hear that you skirted the Kara-Bugaz shoreline in your corvette. I am greatly interested in the details of your voyage."

Zherebtsov finished his story at dusk, when countless campfires blazed up on the banks of the Ural and threw their reflection on the windows of the smoke-laden room. The nomads had girdled the town with their dusty tents and were resting after their trek across the desert.

"With regard to the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz," Zherebtsov finally mustered up enough courage to say, "I have a daring proposal to make to the government."

Karelin did not ask any questions. He only settled himself more comfortably in his creaking armchair and adjusted his spectacles.

"Inasmuch," Zherebtsov continued, "as the Kara-Bugaz is doing damage, it is necessary to put an end to its existence as an isolated gulf and turn it into a lake by damming up the narrow strait. The dam will not cost the treasury much to build, since the Kirghizians work for next to nothing."

"Just what, my dear lieutenant," Karelin drawled, "just what grounds have you for asserting that the Kara-Bugaz is doing damage? Can you tell me that?"

He shouted the last words and then began to fidget angrily in his armchair.

Zherebtsov was dumbfounded. Had not Karelin himself written that the Kara-Bugaz was as barren as, say, the moon? Why the angry question and the choleric glitter of the eyes behind the metal-rimmed spectacles?

"I will explain right away," he murmured. He was obstinate. He raised his hand and bent one finger down. "The gulf swallows a great amount of sea water, like a bottomless pit. You are well acquainted with this circumstance."



You also know that the level of the sea is slowly falling, in some places threatening navigation. The cause of this calamity must be sought in the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz."

"That is one."

Karelin followed suit and bent a long plump finger.

"Two," Zherebtsov went on, bending a second finger. "The fish resources in our sea are diminishing from year to year. I saw dead fish in quantity in the Kara-Bugaz. I believe that by damming the gulf and putting an end to the natural destruction of fish and small fry the government would benefit considerably."

"Is that all?" Karelin asked impatiently. "Did you see much dead fish?"

Zherebtsov reddened. He was not accustomed to having his word questioned.

"In places my men counted as many as a hundred and fifty fish to every twenty-five yards of shoreline. The dead fish pile up in such quantities that the sea gulls peck only at their eyes, leaving the flesh to rot. Moreover, I must say I have never seen such lazy and sated sea gulls anywhere else. Finally, separation of the gulf will mean the formation of a new salt lake of exceptional dimensions. That is all."

"You would like, I take it, to receive my approbation of this most strange idea of yours?" Karelin asked in a hissing whisper. Then he suddenly shouted, as though he had just bowled a particularly heavy ball: "Non-sense!"

He rose. Through the window behind Karelin's broad back Zherebtsov could see crimson smoke rising from the campfires on the riverbank. It seemed as though Tamerlane's hordes had come to a halt at the creaking armchair of the thickset old sage. He towered over the table like a statue wrought by steppe nomads out of large-grained grey stone.

Hoping to mitigate Karelin's incomprehensible anger, Zherebtsov muttered in embarrassment:

"Instead of a dam a wire screen could be put up to prevent the Caspian fish from getting through to the gulf."

But Karelin had already cooled off. He removed his glasses and gazed mockingly at Zherebtsov, like a foxy



grandad. He seemed to be turning something over in his mind. Finally he stated in a low voice:

"You are young and therefore rash."

"I do not think you are so old yourself."

"The desert!" Karelin raised his voice again. "The desert has eaten away my youth! It's turned my hair grey and my skin flabby and given me all the other forerunners of old age. There was an American newspaperman who spent a week in the sands of Kara-Kum and then wrote of the beneficent effect of the desert on the skin, and particularly on the teeth. The skin, he said, becomes rejuvenated, and the teeth strong and dazzlingly white." Karelin gave a wry smile and stretched down the skin on his cheeks. "Here's the proof of that. The desert sun is disastrous. The entire human race blesses the sun's rays, but here they are deservedly cursed: they deprive man of his last means of subsistence. But this has nothing to do with our argument. I am informed that you have sent the Hydrographic Administration a report in which you mention the remarkable bottom of the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz. If my memory does not deceive me"—the old man peered at the window through narrowed lids—"you wrote: 'The gulf bottom is quite remarkable: salt, and under the salt, limy clay. It seems to me the salt is of a special composition'"—here Karelin paused and glanced absent-mindedly at the amazed lieutenant—"different from the salt we use in cooking. . . ." Is that right?"

"Absolutely."

"I should be very interested to know in what way that salt is so remarkable."

Zherebtsov smiled.

"Its extraordinary properties were determined on board the corvette in a droll manner. We put the salt we had brought up from the bottom on deck to dry, and the ship's cook, a man of limited intelligence, used some of it to salt the soup for the crew. Two hours later the whole crew came down with a furious attack of loose bowels. The salt turned out to have the same effect as castor oil."

Karelin began to chuckle soundlessly. His armchair seemed to be laughing with him, and the air too, in which



the clouds of strong tobacco smoke commenced to whirl and dance.

"My dear sir," said Karelin after having laughed his fill. "I made the same mistake as you. I considered the Kara-Bugaz a barren place created by nature to spite man, as it were. But recently, as I studied my diaries and reflected upon the lethal properties of the gulf water, I was assailed by doubts, since in the nature that surrounds us there is hardly a single evil that cannot be made to serve man. This caustic Kara-Bugaz salt is very remarkable indeed, and I am wondering whether it is not Glauber's or, to use its other name, alkaline, salt? Its effect on your crew is quite noteworthy. If it is Glauber's salt that is settling to the bottom, then it would be a crime to destroy the gulf. This salt possesses many exceptional properties. I should like to point out to you one of them, almost the most important, I should say." Karelin pulled out one of the drawers of his desk and reached for a yellowed manuscript. He smoothed it out and straightened the corners of the thick sheets. "Do you happen to know that a great chemist by the name Cyril Laxman lived and died in Russia?"

"I am ashamed to admit, Grigory Silych, that I have not heard the name."

"There is no need for you to be ashamed, sir; it is our country that should be ashamed, a country in which talented people are priced no higher than our Guryev policemen!" Karelin shouted with his former anger. "The life of this remarkable man is an example of endless suffering. A Finn by birth, he was forced by the poverty of his parents to become a pastor, and from his home in the town of Neushlot he was assigned to a church in Barnaul, in the remoteness of Siberia. His duties as pastor irked him, and he preferred to travel about Siberia. During these travels he made many discoveries pertaining to the flora and the subterranean riches of the region. At the same time he occupied himself with chemistry. In recognition of his scientific achievements he was elected to the Academy, but instead of settling in St. Petersburg he preferred to stay in Siberia in the post of a mining adviser. For some minor oversight he was relieved of his position and appointed district police officer in Ner-



chinsk. So you see, my dear lieutenant, what a suitable post the Russian government prepared for a talented scientist and a member not only of our Academy of Sciences but of the Academy of Sciences of Sweden as well. . . . What I want to say, however, is that this Cyril Laxman discovered the possibility of manufacturing out of Glauber's salt a glass as excellent as the English. This manuscript is his report of the discovery. Laxman called Glauber's salt 'bitter salt.' This is what he wrote."

Karelin began to read slowly:

"Of the many new properties of this bitter salt, called by the Mongol peoples *gujar*, the one most worthy of attention is its property of turning into glass."

"During his experiments Laxman obtained white glass and a glass as black as Chinese lacquer. . . . And so"—Karelin pushed aside the manuscript—"further explanations are superfluous. The closing of the gulf would bring about a change in the properties of the water and put an end to the formation of Glauber's salt. Your assertion that the gulf is making the Caspian Sea shallow, and your compunction for the dying fish, are both exaggerated. I could easily refute every single one of your arguments here and now. But perhaps we'd better go and have some tea; I've received some excellent cranberry juice from Uralsk."

Moving aside to let Zherebtsov pass into the dining room, Karelin made fierce eyes and whispered:

"And you had a project all drawn up. Those people in St. Petersburg are fools. They don't like to think. All they will do is cry out: 'close the gulf forever and thrill Europe!' If you were to mention the word 'open,' maybe those statesmen would do a bit of reflecting, but since 'close' is the word, then close it'll be. Closing up things is their ideal."

By the time Zherebtsov returned to his boat it was late in the evening, and he reached the corvette in the small hours of the morning. Wild ducks were quacking sleepily amid the rustling reeds lining the banks of the Ural. Blue flashes of summer lightning streaked over the Daghestan side of the sea. The monotonous rumbling of the surf against the sand bars could be heard on deck.



Zherebtsov paced the quarter deck for a long time, upset by the blunder he had made. The Caspian Sea, which he had studied in such detail, now appeared ominous and mysterious. On the side of the desert, where, as Zherebtsov knew, the muddy Emba was lazily trickling amid the salt marshes, there suddenly burst up a cupola of red fire. Zherebtsov started: could that be the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz smoking again out of the disturbing inky darkness? But no, it was the moon rising over the Ust-Urt plains.

Zherebtsov filled his pipe and sighed with vexation: for the first time in his two years of cruising in that sea he felt tired of it.

Slumbering seals were snuffling in the water near the corvette. The officer on duty said jokingly to Zherebtsov:

"Time you went to sleep, Ignaty Alexandrovich. Even the fish are sleeping at this hour."

Zherebtsov went down to his cabin and opened the porthole. A dull rumble was coming from the flashes of summer lightning. Feeling suffocated, Zherebtsov drew out of his desk the final copy of his project, swiftly tore it up and threw it out of the porthole.

## THE BOY WITH THE SILVER THROAT

I DEEPLY regret that the documents concerning Zherebtsov's life are lost and that the little that has come down to us is so disconnected.

Luckily, not long before his death Zherebtsov, then in retirement, made the acquaintance of the writer Yevseyenko. This writer contributed diligently to the *Niva* and the *Rodina*: his simple short stories were intended for readers with plenty of leisure, chiefly for summer suburbanites, and in no way scintillated with talent.

Yevseyenko had a certain gift for description, but, like many of his contemporaries (we are referring to the nineties of the last century), he was taken with a passion for catching moods. He described the moods of nature, of men and of beasts; he described his own moods, and even



the moods of whole cities. He also described the moods of the country places surrounding Moscow.

It was in one of these country places that he came across Zherebtsov. His experienced eye at once detected a story in the kindly old mariner and he set to work to fish it out. Failing to fish out a story, he finally contented himself with writing a short sketch which, however, was never printed, as he came down with an acute form of tuberculosis and was sent to Yalta, where he died soon after. Below is the manuscript of his sketch, with my abridgements. The sketch interested me only in so far as it contained information about the last days of Zherebtsov—the first explorer of the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz. It is entitled *A Fateful Blunder*.

“If you ever attend art shows, dear reader, you undoubtedly remember Savrassov’s paintings of small provincial yards overgrown with mallow. A decrepit but cosy house with numerous little wings and additions; lindens (with daws’ nests) growing by the windows; grass pushing up thick amid the wood shavings; a black pup tied to a rope; a fence with a few loose boards, and beyond the fence—the mirror-like surface of a picturesque river and the rich gold of an autumnal forest on a warm sunny day in September.

“The suburban train speeding past the old house renders the scene still more charming; through the trailing clouds of steam, you can glimpse the yellow leafage of the woods.

“If you are fond of autumn, dear reader, you must know that this is the season when the water in the rivers turns a bright chilly blue. It was just such a day, and the water was a deep blue; yellow willow leaves floated on its surface, and a sweetish smell of damp pervaded the air.”

(I should have cut this out, but I’m leaving it in since it gives an idea of the environment in which Zherebtsov passed the latter days of his solitary old age.—K. P.)

“The wet birch leaves stick to your shoes, to the steps of the railroad car, and to the large billboards on which the merchants of Moscow praise their wares for the benefit of the country folk sitting at the coach windows.



"It is of these billboards, and in particular one of them, exhorting all and sundry to use Katyk's cigarette paper, that I want to tell you, dear reader.

"On the September day of which we are speaking, I came upon an old man in a much-worn naval greatcoat standing in front of one of those peeling, weather-scarred billboards. His face was striking by virtue of its heavy coat of tan, accentuated by the grey of his hair and the pallidness of the northern autumn day. One felt that the sun of sultry Asiatic seas had dyed the old man's skin so thoroughly that even the rainy weather of Central Russia could not obliterate its effects.

"He was leaning on his stick and reading in a sneering undertone Katyk's exhortations to buy his cigarette paper No. 110.

"'Scoundrel!' the old man growled, brandishing his stick. 'A swindler, and a clever one too!'

"'About whom are you talking?'

"'About Katyk, sir, about the manufacturer Katyk,' the old man replied amiably enough. Apparently he was not averse to airing his views on the subject.

"I wanted to know why he thought Katyk was a scoundrel and a swindler.

"'It's a long story. If you like, come to my place—it's just around the corner—and have a cup of tea. I'll tell you all about Katyk.'

"The old man led me over to one of the yards described above, and showed me into a spotlessly clean room. There was an array of long-necked, pink-feathered stuffed birds on the shelves. The walls were hung with marine charts marked up in red pencil and water colours depicting the barren shores of a stormy green sea. On the table stood a neat pile of old books. I glanced at the titles—they were works on the hydrography of various seas and books of travels treating of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea. While the landlord's little daughter bustled around a samovar, the old man opened a box of yellow Feodosiya tobacco and rolled a fat cigarette.

"'Now then, my dear sir,' he said, wreathing himself in smoke, 'let me first introduce myself. I am Ignaty



Alexandrovich Zherebtsov, a retired sailor, a hydrographer. I compiled charts of the Caspian Sea. I am now on the right side of eighty.

"You were interested in Katyk. Well, then, I can tell you that Katyk is quite unsuccessfully trying to rectify an error I committed in my youth, at the time I finished cruising in the Caspian. I was the first to explore the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz in the Caspian—I don't know whether you've ever heard of the place—and my blunder consisted in asserting that it was absolutely of no good to the country since it did not possess any natural resources. However, I discovered that the bottom of the gulf consists of a salt that, upon later investigation, turned out to be Glauber's salt. The Kara-Bugaz is an extraordinary place. Its air is dry, its water is thick and corrosive, its shores are absolutely barren, and, finally, its size is vast. It is hemmed in on all sides by sand, and after sailing its waters I began to suffer from asthma. Only here, in the North, have I found relief—night after night I used to gasp for breath. I thought then I'd actually choke to death.

"Well, I was stupid enough to want to set before the government a project for blocking the narrow entrance to the gulf with a dam, so as to cut it off from the sea.

"Why? Because I was convinced of the harmful effect of its waters, which were poisoning untold quantities of Caspian fish. Besides, I explained the mysteriously increasing shallowness of the sea by the fact that the gulf was swallowing its waters insatiably.

"I forgot to tell you that the sea rushes into the gulf with tremendous force. I figured that if the gulf were stopped up, the level of the sea would begin to rise at the rate of more than an inch a year. I intended to have sluices built into the dam and thus keep the sea at a level suitable for navigation. But the late Grigory Silych Karelin—I can never thank him enough—talked me out of that mad project."

"The project was rather extraordinary, but still I asked the old man why he thought it mad.

"You see, my good man, as I've already said, the gulf bottom consists of Glauber's salt. Scientists are of the opinion that millions of poods of this salt settle to the



bottom of the gulf every year. The most fabulous deposit of Glauber's salt in the world one might say—so much wealth—and suddenly all of it would have been destroyed at a single stroke.

“ ‘There was a second error—these northern districts are to blame for that. I'm a Kaluga man, and I'd spent fifteen years in the Caspian Sea. Down there—if you've ever been in those parts you should know without my telling you—it is dreary, dusty, windy and desolate, and there's not a blade of grass, not a tree, not a trickle of running fresh water to be found anywhere around.

“ ‘I should have—the moment I realized what great resources the Kara-Bugaz contained—busied myself with it all and stirred up the scientists, but instead I gave the whole thing up and thought of one thing only: the quickest way of getting back to my Zhizdra forests. I had no use for the Kara-Bugaz and its salt. I was ready to exchange a dozen Kara-Bugazes for my Kaluga woods. You see, I longed for that pungent smell of mushrooms in the air and the sound of rain pattering on the leaves—for all the things I remembered from my childhood days.

“ ‘Naturally enough, our weaknesses are oftentimes stronger than the dictates of reason. I turned my back on glory and committed what I might call a crime before the human race. I returned to my home near Zhizdra and felt quite happy about it. In the meantime the rumour that Lieutenant Zherebtsov had discovered a remarkable salt at the bottom of the gulf reached the scientists. They sent Turkmenians down to the gulf for samples of the water. The analysis showed that the water contained pure Glauber's salt, without which glassmaking and many other manufactures are impossible.

“ ‘This is when that scoundrel Katyk appeared on the scene. Cigarette paper and trotters weren't enough for him, you see. He decided to extract the salt from the gulf; his task was simplified by the fact that in winter the waves cast mountains of it on the shore. He founded a stock company and swindled everybody; the government practically gave him the gulf, yet he's not shipping out any salt. That's why I say that this Katyk of yours is a rascal.' ”



Further Yevseyenko gives a detailed account of Zhreb-tsov's amusing conversations with his landlord's daughter, and of his friendship with the neighbourhood boys, for whom he was a supreme authority in matters of fishing and the training of pigeons. The old man called the boys "bubbles" and "bugs."

On holidays, a boy with a silver tube in his throat, the son of his deceased comrade, used to come down from Moscow to see him (our book opens with Zhrebtssov's letter to this friend). They passed the time making bird traps and fishing rods, and conducted chemical experiments.

Sometimes Zhrebtssov would let the boy spend the night with him, and then his room would buzz until the small hours of the morning with their talk. Zhrebtssov would tell the boy of his cruises, and it must be said that he never had a more attentive audience.

The boy would gaze through the window at the sharp-edged stars as he listened to him. Afterwards, he found it hard to fall asleep. But when the two did fall asleep, they slept like innocent babes. Even the shrill calls of the roosters greeting the new grey dawn could not disturb their sweet slumbers.

On one such morning Zhrebtssov did not wake up.

He was buried in a desolate cemetery at the fringe of the forest. The funeral was attended by his landlord, who was the proprietor of a shoemaking establishment, the boy with the silver throat, several "pigeon" boys, and Yevseyenko.

A week later damp brown pine needles fell down and covered the grave. Long rainy nights and short cold days set in, and Zhrebtssov was soon forgotten by everybody but the boy with the silver throat. He came down every now and again from Moscow to visit the grave. He would stand by it for a few moments and then take the long forest trail back to the railroad station, where columns of puffy steam rose to the sky.

All our attempts to find Zhrebtssov's grave now have been fruitless. Nor was there any real need to look for it: did old Russia lack explorers who had died unknown, explorers whose names lie buried forever in dusty and abandoned archives?



## THE BLACK ISLAND

With your valiant blood  
are the deserts  
besprinkled,  
They are scarlet banners  
that, rustling,  
above us float.

Mayakovsky.

IT WAS the end of January 1920. A gale was hurling the spray against the windows of the low port buildings and a heavy rain was beating down on the streets of Petrovsk. The mountains were enveloped in mist. The sea lay under ice all the way to Astrakhan.

The old s.s. *Nikolai* was getting up steam. Her dirty cabins were hung with last year's calendars and flyblown portraits of Kolchak. Her decks were littered with cigarette stubs and faded newspapers. In the roundhouse the mate on duty, all crumpled and blue with the cold, sat waiting for the captain. The captain was somewhere in town.

The evil-smelling smoke issuing from the galley advertised that the cook was preparing barley gruel with mouse droppings in it. But not even this could shake off the despondency that was eating into the ship like rust. The men lay sprawled about in the forecastle. The grumpy yellow-skinned steward was asleep on the red plush divan in the saloon.

Taking advantage of the bleak day, the ship's lean bedbugs swarmed out of all the cracks. In the hold, a cock stolen the day before sang out a hoarse cock-a-doodle-do.

"It's time this guitar of ours was hauled off to the cemetery," the mate thought as he glanced at the wheel, on which he could see a brass plate with the information in English, that the steamer *Nikolai* had been built in 1877 in Newcastle.

The mate shifted his glance to the yellow funnel which had seen better days. Reddish smoke was pouring out of it.

"What the hell are they burning, rubbish or what?" he grumbled, and then gave a start. A cannon report had rent the mist curling over the mountains.



A sailor with rubbers on his bare feet climbed out of the forecastle. He dragged his feet listlessly across the deck, went up on the bridge and strained his ears: the dull thuds were growing more frequent.

"Looks like the Reds are beating the Whites," he remarked to the mate. "The Reds," he whispered, and his eyes narrowed, "are advancing from Khasav-Yurt; they'll be in Petrovsk tonight. We've got to see the captain about this. The crew'd like to get away from the evacuation. We could sneak out to sea in the evening, all quiet and respectable, with no Whites and no guns."

The sailor pointed to the east, where the sea was seething like a cauldron full of dirty suds.

The mate glanced at the stern, where a wet tri-coloured flag was flapping in the wind, and sighed. Christ, if everything would work out as they had planned—if they could only slip away from the Denikinites and the evacuation!

"The captain's disappeared; we'll get cooked because of him," he muttered mournfully as he went out on deck.

He peered into the slanting rain drumming down on the rotten boards of the wharves, and spat. A group of men in green English army coats were coming toward the ship. They were dragging a machine gun by a rope, and sloshing straight through the puddles in their sodden boots. The mate caught sight of the familiar raincoat-clad figure of the captain standing to one side. Raindrops were dripping from his moustache. He looked as though he were weeping noiselessly.

A detachment of Denikinites trooped up on deck over the slippery gangplank. An officer with bulging grey eyes went into the saloon and pulled the sleeping steward by the leg.

"Get to where you belong, you thief!" he croaked.

The steward fished a napkin out of his pocket, mopped his face and stalked out.

After closing the door of the saloon he gave it such a look that had it been able to, it would undoubtedly have shrivelled up.

Soldiers sporting tri-coloured stripes on their sleeves—the insignia of the "Death Battalion"—wrenched open the locked cabin doors and muttered threats through clenched teeth. A sentry was stationed at the gangplank.



The captain came into the roundhouse and fumbled for a long time with the buttons of his soggy raincoat. The mate watched him dejectedly and waited.

At length the captain pulled out his battered copper cigarette case and lit up.

"Well, we're in for it! We've been taken over for the evacuation. I made a row at headquarters, told them my ship was falling to pieces even when anchored in port, and how in blazes was I to take her out to sea in this storm? They laughed at me. 'We'll give you the kind of cargo you won't have to bother about,' they said. 'What sort of cargo is that?' 'Bolsheviks from the prison, see?' 'But where'll I put them?' 'Oh, there's just the place for them. You put them where we want them put. And if you don't feel like going out to sea, we'll have a little talk with you in the cellar. Then you might change your mind.'"

The captain sat down and took up the log. In the hills the guns spoke up again, and a yellow light flashed in the rain. The captain read the slanting entries in the log: "Wind—NE gale. Sea—rough. Water in hold—30 cm."

"Thirty centimetres!" The captain tossed the log aside with a crooked twist of his lips. "We're going to put human beings in the hold." His face flushed purple. "In the water, in the hold! Look at where we've got to, sailing under the tsar's flag. This is the limit. We'll be carrying live cargo, like bulls to the slaughter. Oh, God. . . ."

He wanted to say something else but broke off short. The officer with the bulging eyes was standing in the doorway.

"My dear captain." He stepped gallantly over the high threshold of the cabin. "Have the hold opened. The prisoners will be brought up presently."

The hatches were thrown open, but the prisoners were brought up only at midnight, when rifle fire could be heard crackling behind the oil reservoirs.

The Reds were pressing in on the town. The desertion to the Denikinites of the Turkish officer Kazim-bei, who had been in command of the Red units, did not save the town. Kazim-bei, whose evil name became notorious all over Daghestan at the time, was an agent of the Mussavatists. He had penetrated into the disposition of the Red units,



gained their trust, participated in their battles and then had waited for a suitable moment to betray them. Kazimbei's betrayal had increased the fury of the Red units tenfold. They had commenced an offensive along the whole front, and their advance detachments were now fighting at the approaches to Petrovsk.

The *Nikolai* rocked at the wharfside, wheezing as she let out exhaust steam. Her ungainly hulk was wrapped in gloom—the orders had been not to switch on the lights. The sea, the port, the town, the hills—all were submerged in a deep, wind-fanned darkness. Only the foam gleamed white as it spilled over the storm-battered mole.

The prisoners were brought up very quietly. The mate counted them from the bridge.

"Almost a hundred," he said to the captain when the last black shadow, prodded on by a rifle butt, had slowly descended into the hold. A cold stream of air mingled with the smell of rotting leather issued from the hold.

They put out at night.

The *Nikolai* skirted the mole, creaked, emitted a shriek and raised her nose high up in the air. Icy mountains of water rolled under her mouldering bottom. In the saloon the glasses slid off the tables.

The soldiers crowded at the rails and looked back at the shore, over which frequent shell explosions were flashing dimly. The steward stood looking with them. The wind ruffled his thinning hair. The Caspian combers hammered at the ship's sides.

A few moments before the departure an elderly officer with a clipped grey beard had come up on board. His spindle legs were wrapped in black silk puttees, and his sparse hair was parted and slicked down with great care. He called for tea to be served in the saloon, asked for the captain, slowly unrolled a chart on the table and placed his small hands on it.

The captain entered, ruddy from the wind, and stopped glumly in the doorway.

"Come closer." The officer gave a wooden smile. The smile frightened the captain: that was the way people usually smiled in the presence of a doomed man.



"At your service." The captain approached the table.

The officer drew a red pencil out of his pocket, sharpened it unhurriedly with a razor blade, lit a cigarette, narrowed his eyes, and, searching out a point on the chart, marked a thick cross over it. Then, measuring the distance, he drew a straight line across the sea from Petrovsk to the marked place.

"Keep to this course," he said.

The captain glanced at the chart.

"To the Kara-Bugaz?" he asked in alarm.

"More or less, but only more or less. Hold your course a bit more north, for this island here. What is it called? Just a moment"—the officer looked at the map—"the Island of Kara-Ada."

"That's impossible," the captain mumbled.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"There are no anchorages near the island. And then the storm will be hitting us broadside, and we are sailing without cargo. I consider the course dangerous."

"But doesn't the storm seem to be subsiding?" the officer asked blandly.

"In general it is impossible to sail past the shores of the Kara-Bugaz in winter. There are no lights there, and many reefs. I have no right to risk the lives of the people on board, or the ship itself, for that matter. The sea in those parts is completely desolate."

"Oh, you don't say?" the officer said in a singsong voice.

"That's excellent. We are just looking for a desolate sea. Yes, indeed!" he suddenly piped in a shrill falsetto. "Be so good as to carry out my instructions, if you don't want me to shove you down into the hold with those brutes. Tell the crew we are sailing for Krasnovodsk—and not to slouch about on deck if they have nothing to do. That is all. You may go!"

The captain went out. He found the mate in the round-house, standing next to a sailor, examining the reel of the compass and comparing it with something written on a slip of paper.

"We've fallen into a trap, and there's no way out," the captain thought. Back in his cabin, he got out the Cas-



pian Sea Sailing Directions and turned the pages until he found a description of Kara-Ada Island.

The Directions stated that the island, once part of a cliff on the mainland, was totally uninhabited and had no water. It lay one mile off the eastern shore, opposite Cape Bek-Tash and north of the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz. It teemed with snakes. There was only one place where a row-boat could land. The approaches to the island were dangerous because of numerous reefs. There were no anchorages. The sea bottom here was smooth rock and would take no anchors.

"We're sunk!" The captain threw the Directions down on the table. The sea was running high. The dim mast lights lit up the tall bow jerking from side to side. The bell rang of itself, which meant that the ship was now rolling over at an angle of forty degrees. The officer with the bulging grey eyes, frightened, went up to spar deck and leaned over the side to relieve himself. He vomited into the black water, groaned and cursed. The January night came whirling in from the east, forecasting inevitable disaster.

It was dark in the hold, and the water swished from side to side. The prisoners sat and lay on the wet boards. They were tossed from corner to corner; they caught at the rusty ribs and bruised their faces; they were stunned by the deafening impact of the waves against the sides; they groaned, overcome by seasickness. Very few of them suspected that this might easily be the end, that the decrepit old ship carried no cargo or ballast, that she was listing at an angle of forty degrees, that at any moment she might capsize and never rise again; but everyone knew quite well that death was waiting for them on that unknown land where they would be put ashore.

The geologist Shatsky, whose presence among the prisoners was accidental, was also well aware of this. He was not a Bolshevik. He had been making his way from Petrovsk to Astrakhan when he was arrested on suspicion of espionage and put in jail. In Petrovsk he had been led out to be shot three times, but they did not shoot him. The



prisoners were led out at night in groups of fifty and taken to the garbage dumps, where swarms of hounds battered on the flesh of the corpses.

The doomed prisoners were lined up and counted. On the first night every tenth prisoner was shot. That night Shatsky turned out to be the eighth. The second time they shot every fifth prisoner, but Shatsky was the fourth. The third time they shot every fourth prisoner, but again Shatsky was lucky—he was the first. After the third time he turned grey. Together with the other survivors he was forced to dump the corpses into the old chalk pits. They dragged the corpses by the feet. For a whole day afterward they felt as though their hands had been smeared heavily with soap.

The officer with the bulging eyes had been in command of the execution squad. Each night he had soused himself with liquor to bolster up his courage, called the prisoners “offal,” and made them change places several times before starting to count. In the jargon of the guards—sickly-looking youths with insolent, bloodshot eyes—this was called the “Viennese Quadrille.”

Shatsky had come to Petrovsk from the Mangyshlak Peninsula. He had been prospecting for coal and phosphorites in the Kara-Tau Mountains and had intended to go on to the Kara-Bugaz, but the Kirghizian guides had refused pointblank to take him there. Summer was at its height and there was not a drop of water to be found in the sands of Karyn-Yaryk on the way to the Kara-Bugaz. He was forced to turn back and trek across the wild Udyuk plateau to Fort Alexandrovsk. Shatsky spent three months in the fort. The dreariness of this bleak town that was under no administrative rule at the time appealed to him. While there, he wrote an account of the expedition and an interesting paper on the water resources of the infernally dry Mangyshlak.

During his expedition he had noticed that the tiny little brooks in the Kara-Tau Mountains invariably flowed out from under the rocks. Shatsky was of the type of men who look for an explanation for everything. He lived in a world of absolutely precise laws and reliable hypotheses.



He spent several days reflecting upon the origin of these brooks. Finally he hired two boys to carry piles of pebbles from the seashore to an empty cement reservoir in his yard. His landlord, a fisherman, was sure that he had gone mad from homesickness and "science."

Shatsky and the boys filled the reservoir with pebbles. On the third morning he removed some of them. The undersides of the pebbles were wet and there was a pool of clear water on the bottom of the reservoir.

The problem was solved: On the Mangyshlak Peninsula as everywhere else in the desert, the summer days are fiercely hot, whereas the summer nights are as cold as the nights in March in Moscow. Rocky stretches are natural condensers of the vapours in the air, which cool rapidly at night. These rocky stretches absorb the moisture, pass it down and retain it under their layers.

Shatsky's landlord was more delighted by the discovery than anyone else. He dreamed of building a large reservoir, filling it with pebbles and drawing ten buckets of delicious fresh water from it every morning, instead of the putrid liquid he pulled up out of his well.

Zachary Dubsky, a merchant who used to be the supreme ruler of the Mangyshlak Peninsula, came to see the reservoir. Shatsky replied coldly to the tiresome questions of the sallow old man in the shabby lutestring jacket.

Before the revolution, Dubsky had been a millionaire. The tsarist government had given him a lease on the whole of the peninsula. He alone was permitted to trade there and to fish with complete disregard of the laws "on the preservation of fish." The pious, soft-spoken old man used to pay the Kirghiz workingmen two rubles for the whole fishing season, sell vodka, and send gifts to his "benefactor," the Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich, who resided in Tashkent. This greybearded duke was notorious throughout the Transcaspian region for his habit of walking about his garden and house completely naked during the sweltering heat.

Thus clad in nothing, he received callers and heard out reports.



Dubsky stared in amazement at Shatsky's reservoir, poked the bottom with his finger, scratched it with a yellow nail, sucked his wet finger mistrustfully and invited Shatsky over to his villa. The villa, which was famous because it had a few stunted trees, stood on the seashore near the Tyub-Karagan Lighthouse. Shatsky took an immediate dislike to the ridiculous house, where the Old Believer merchant drank himself sick with tea as he gazed out at the smoky haze hovering over the desert.

The desert came right up to the fort; it stood guard over the town gates. The meagre clay and grey wormwood of the desert were conducive to melancholy. But this melancholy was to a certain extent mixed with pride: the dreariness of the desert was so majestic and merciless; few people, Shatsky thought to himself, were fortunate enough to experience the gripping emotions evoked by the barren and unexplored expanses.

A retired general of limited intellect, formerly the commander of the local provincial garrison, also lived in Fort Alexandrovsk. He spent his time inventing traps for susliks. The fishermen told the story that this general, upon arriving at the fort, had dashed out on his wild bay stallion, galloped up to the Kirghizians on parade and, wishing to greet them in their own tongue, had thundered out:

"Greetings to you, *saksauls*!"

The Kirghizians were startled out of their skins. The whole town roared with laughter for several days after.

The most interesting inhabitants of the fort were the seal hunters. Seal hunting was considered a dangerous and difficult occupation. In winter the hunters set out in large groups over the icebound sea. The entire autumn previous to this their horses were fattened and whipped into a frenzy. The horses decided the outcome of the hunt: if the ice cracked with a rumbling sound and began to drift slowly out to sea, the seal hunters would spur their horses frantically back to shore, and these wild animals hurdled over the fissures together with the sleighs and men.

Only the cubs of the seals, too young yet to swim, were killed. They were clubbed to death on the ice and their expensive golden pelts carried back to the fort.



Every winter several seal hunting artels—*koshi* they were called—met their doom. They were carried out to sea on ice floes in the direction of Persia. They were rarely saved; there was no telegraph line in the fort over which the "Russia" Insurance Company could be informed of the disaster.

Shatsky learned that Taras Shevchenko had been exiled to Fort Alexandrovsk. He had been recruited into the army and banished to the Mangyshlak penal servitude garrison for participating in the Ukrainian Kirill-Mefody Fraternity.

Only in November did Shatsky manage to get away from the fort in a *reyushka*, or fishing boat, and reach Petrovsk.

Now Shatsky was lying in the hold next to the Bolshevik sailor Hans Miller, with whom he had spent three months in prison. Twice they had been led out together to be shot, and if Shatsky still retained his reason he had only Miller to thank for it.

This taciturn youth in the naval jacket had told Shatsky about his native Estonia, about the dunes, and about old Reval. Shatsky could not help thinking that now it was winter in Reval, a grey winter smelling of greenish Baltic ice, with faint lights twinkling prettily. And it was a lonely winter, for thousands of Hans Millers had left home and were fighting in the Red detachments near Samara and Shenkursk, were languishing in foul prisons, were starving, were living in frosty, dilapidated freight cars.

Miller had been captured during a reconnaissance sally. It was inevitable that the Denikinites would "knock him off," as he put it, but he was thinking of something far removed from death—of escape, no doubt.

When Shatsky had trembled shamefully on those nights of the executions, Miller slapped him on the back and said: "Chuck it, man! We've got to die some day anyway."

Shatsky was amazed at Miller's fortitude, the fortitude of a helmsman of the Baltic Fleet and a Bolshevik since 1917. Miller was ten years younger than Shatsky and



had not a hundredth part of his knowledge, but the geologist felt like a boy before the sailor.

Miller was irreconcilable and knew what the geologist did not know—the laws of struggle and victory. He regarded people with calm understanding. He had a habit of whistling continuously, and during interrogation he answered very politely but vaguely; he smiled with boredom at the infuriated pale-faced officers, as though they were showing him a trick he had seen long ago.

He had won a name for himself by reducing the chief of intelligence to hysterics and then calmly pouring him out a glass of water. The chief had swept the glass off the table, struck the papers on his desk with his walking stick and promised to hang Miller that very evening. But he didn't.

Intelligence considered Miller a "dangerous fellow" and a commissar, and had hoped to squeeze important information out of him. They had never flogged him with ramrods. His guards regarded him with a certain respect, as much as to say: "He's a tough louse, that one; you can see he's got guts."

Now Shkolnik, a saddler from Odessa who had become a guerilla fighter, got up and crawled over to Miller, the only sailor among the prisoners. Asking him for a smoke, he said:

"You're a sailor and know the insides of ships."

"Uh-huh," said Miller.

"This is what I've decided," Shkolnik went on in his soft voice. "We've got to sink the ship and those rats up there." Shkolnik pointed his cigarette at the ceiling. "Open the stopcock or the Kingston valve or whatever you call it. We'll be killed anyway. If we have to die we might as well finish them off at the same time."

"The Kingston valve isn't here," Miller replied indifferently. "Why talk nonsense? Their day is ending, and even if only a dozen of us come out of it alive it'll be to the good. Don't cook up any mass suicides, Shkolnik. Don't start a panic."

"Well, well!" Shkolnik muttered in disappointment and crawled away.



The captain sat up in his cabin all night without taking off his coat. Dawn arrived late, at eight o'clock. A grey mist swayed in the chilly cabins. Beyond the moist portholes the sea continued to roar. In the east, over the boundless deserts of Asia, there was an icy yellow glow.

The captain went out on deck. The floor of the saloon was strewn with sleeping green-clad soldiers. Morning, vast and bleak, streamed in over their creased coats with the tri-coloured stripes, over their stacked rifles and their bloated visages. The room smelled of vomit and alcohol. The dirty mirror reflected a pot of withered fuchsia.

For some unknown reason the steward was wiping the yellowed cups and laying out starched, crackling tablecloths. Old habits ever assert themselves.

He gave the captain a hangdog look and sighed. Yes, those lovely cruises from Astrakhan to Baku were over. In those days even he, a steward afflicted with occupational misanthropy, used to joke with the passengers and pat children on the head.

"It's all over, Konstantin Petrovich!" The steward opened an empty cupboard. "Will you have a drop of vodka? I shouldn't wonder your soul's chilled to the marrow. Syomkin was right yesterday when he said this was a floating gallows and not the s.s. *Nikolai*."

The steward turned away and mopped his eyes with his dirty napkin. His skinny neck flushed a deep red.

The captain grunted and went out and up to the bridge. He found the old spindle-legged officer of the day before standing there with a pair of binoculars. He was scanning the east and scowling.

He came up to the captain, glanced tenderly into his eyes and scratched his beard.

"When do we reach Kara-Ada, Captain?"

"When we get there."

"Oh. Yes. I see." The officer pulled out a golden cigarette case and lit up, without, however, offering the captain a smoke. "Yes. Yes. I see." He put his hand on the captain's shoulder. The hand seemed very heavy, as heavy



as lead. "Let me know when we come within five miles of the island. By the way, there's no sense in your getting crochety about it." He tightened his grip on the captain's shoulder. "The voyage is secret. Warn the men that they'll answer with their heads for talking."

The captain nodded and carefully removed his shoulder from the other's grip. The officer, swaying on his spider legs, balanced his way down to the ladder.

Two hours later the lookout reported land. The storm was abating. The icy water leisurely lapped at the ship's sides. Low-lying black cliffs carved roughly against the brilliant blue of the sky drew ever nearer through the clear air of the winter day. The *Nikolai* sailed slowly toward the lone island fringed with foamy rollers.

Ten men had died in the hold of typhus. Their bodies plashed in the water. Rogoberidze, a Georgian, was yelling like a madman and pouring handfuls of icy water into his ears. Parotitis was setting in, and he was delirious. It seemed to him that the secret service men were searing his head with red-hot iron, and he kept calling to his comrade:

"Sandro, save me! Sandro, don't let me die!"

At noon the hold was opened.

The fetid air rushed out, accompanied by the hysterical shriek of the Georgian:

"Sandro, beat the scoundrels!"

Shatsky raised his head. High over the sides of the iron well he could see swaying green greatcoats, and above them, higher still, clouds scudding over a cold sky. He was thirsty. As daylight flooded the hold the prisoners blinked and brushed lacklustre tears from their eyelashes.

It was then that Shatsky first saw the iron maw of the hold and the brown water under his feet. The sharpened, blue faces of the corpses were floating in it, swaying ever so gently. Three Avars were lying in a heap, their heads wrapped tightly in their wet hoods. One of them was alive. He lifted his head and muttered something long and plaintive in a strange tongue. Then a rattle sounded in his throat and he fell into the water.

Miller crossed over to the iron ladder and slowly climbed up. Somebody was shouting down, but Shatsky heard noth-



ing; he doggedly climbed up after Miller, straining to keep his grip.

Eighty men emerged from the hold. Those who could not climb out by themselves were left there, and the heavy hatch was battened down again.

The prisoners—a crowd of men green from seasickness, starvation and thirst—were herded to the stern. The fresh air rent their bloodless lungs. Shkolnik was hiccupping loudly and without let-up. Shatsky recalled the stories he had heard about the hiccups of the dying, and turned away.

The ship rocked in the sea off the humped black rock island jutting out of the water.

The grey-haired officer climbed up on the bridge. He ran his eyes over the crowd of prisoners and snorted.

"I congratulate you, comrades, upon your safe arrival." He gestured theatrically in the direction of the island. "Here is your refuge. Here you may proclaim Soviet power. Lieutenant, break the lot up into twenties."

It took the sailors a long time to lower the boats. Shatsky waited listlessly. A sailor slipped him a pack of cheap tobacco. Shatsky glanced at the tobacco with dull eyes and gave it to Miller. He did not smoke.

It took several hours to disembark the prisoners on the Island of Kara-Ada. The large breakers made it difficult for the rowboats to approach land. The prisoners were forced to jump waist-deep into the water and wade ashore.

Shkolnik could not keep his feet. He was knocked over by a wave and carried out to sea. Shatsky saw the man's outstretched arms appear for a moment over the water and realized that Shkolnik was drowning.

When he reached the shore, Shatsky lay down on the stony ground and looked at the ship. Filthy and dreary, painted black and yellow, it was bobbing on the waves and spreading out a tail of foul-smelling smoke.

Shatsky could not grasp what was happening. He had somehow failed to notice that they had been put ashore without a thing, without water or food, or even stale bread. Only Miller knew what that signified. Between the island and the mainland lay a broad, stormy strait.



Shatsky saw the last rowboat return to the ship and the sailors haul it up; they took a long time, getting in one another's way. Then the corpses were brought up out of the hold and thrown overboard—he could see the bluish water splashing behind the stern. The *Nikolai* sounded a blast and, veiling the island in a smoke screen, sailed due south, in the direction of Baku.

“What are we to do now, Miller?” Shatsky muttered, sitting up on the stones.

Miller shook him by the shoulders.

“Get up and gather all the fuel you can find in this damned place. Be brave. There's not a drop of fresh water here. Without water those of us who are still on our feet will live no more than three days. Maybe there are some nomad Turkmenians on the shore across the strait. We've got to send up a smoke signal.”

All evening Shatsky sucked cold little pebbles to allay his thirst. He wandered about the island on shaky feet, looking for dry twigs and bits of flotsam cast up by the sea. The sea was empty. Shatsky knew that at this time of the year not a single ship, not even a single Turkmenian rowboat, would show up in these parts. Who would venture near these dead black shores where there was nothing but sand and bitter salt?

Towards nightfall they built two fires and moved the sick men up to them. By morning sixty prisoners were left.

Three students from Temir-Khan-Shura resolved to swim the strait. Miller did not try to stop them. He threw dry wormwood and all the rubbish he could find on the fires to make them send up clouds of dense white smoke. The students stripped. Two of them went in, but the third fell face down on the ground and broke into sobs; he was too weak and dizzy to attempt it. The swimmers drowned not far from the shore. A tempest was once more raging over the strait. The swift current dashed black waves against the rocks.

In the evening the prisoners crept close to the fires and lay motionless by them. Miller chewed the end of his leather belt and gazed at the shore in the hope of seeing the light of an answering fire there. But there was not a glimmer



of light. Out of the desert sped a black, heavy night laden with mist; it drove the chill air of the hungry, shifting sands to the island.

"Miller," Shatsky whispered during the night. "Miller, I've just remembered that the Kirghizians drive their herds to the Kara-Bugaz in the wintertime: there's snow in the gullies out there."

"We'd be in luck if it snowed," mumbled Miller.

That night another fifteen men died. Shatsky was almost unconscious by morning. Then something that looked like either low black storm clouds or the cold smoke of a gigantic conflagration came rolling out of the east. Shatsky opened his inflamed eyes and stared dully at the clouds, waiting for at least one drop of rain.

The clouds scudded on, jostling one another and sinking ever lower. The sea grew quiet. The wind was changing, and the sea was preparing to charge upon the island from the north, whence a life-saving snowstorm was perhaps already coming.

"It never snows here," Shatsky thought.

He recalled that there had been four hundred of them in prison. Where were the rest? Had they all been shot?

His tongue was swollen. He turned his head with difficulty, and each word he uttered caused his inflamed mouth to throb with pain. The storm clouds were closing down on the earth. Now they were so low that the groans of the men who were dying on the jagged black rocks could reach them. The clouds dragged a damp and cruel evening down with them to the island.

Miller crawled over to the fire and kicked the last pieces of rotten board into it. The putrid odour of decaying flesh drifted across to the fire from behind the near-lying rocks. Miller fell on his belly and lay very still.

Came the last night, borne on the wings of the howling north wind. At midnight Shatsky felt something wet and cold on his face. A thin, stinging snow was falling from the skies. Shatsky wanted to shout, to rouse Miller, but he lacked the strength. All he could do was open his mouth and catch the chance snowflakes that were blown on his cracked black lips by the wind and the spray.



He had to rouse Miller—that is, if the sailor could still be roused. Shatsky dug his fingers into the sharp stones and sat up. His legs were burning: they had probably become frostbitten during the night. The wind swung him about as though he were a scarecrow; it beat him viciously in the back and chilled his inflamed skin.

He forced himself to open his eyes, although he was quite sure that if he opened them he would die; that he could no longer bear the spectacle of that wild, wailing night. Carefully, he unglued his sticky eyelids and peered into the distance like a sleepwalker: there, in the pitch-darkness, beyond the blizzard, he could see the flames of three fires. Was he seeing things or were those really fires on the shore?

Shatsky felt for Miller's cold jacket and pulled it by the collar with all the strength he had left. Miller moaned.

"Miller!" Shatsky whispered, although it seemed to him that he was shouting. "Miller, dear boy, get up! There are fires on the shore, lots of fires!"

Miller stirred and turned on his back with difficulty. Clutching at Shatsky's arms and shoulders, he slowly sat up, turning his hot breath on Shatsky's face.

"Brothers," he said softly, and his voice broke. "Brothers, hurry! Death is all around us, brothers!"

He staggered to his feet.

"What's that?" he shouted to Shatsky. "Lie there and don't budge! Hold on till morning! They must have noticed us."

The prisoners did not stir. Only one of them, a Red Guard, raised his head and dropped it again.

Morning found only twenty-two alive. Toward noon the giant grey wing of a sail bobbed out from behind Cape Bek-Tash in the south. It soared and dipped amid the black waves, struggling with the harsh norther.

Miller alone saw the sail. Shatsky was delirious; he felt as though a rock were crushing him in its heavy arms, and dragging him down into the earth.

Miller threw a coat into the dying fire. A cloud of stifling yellow smoke rose into the air.



The last thing Miller saw was an angular face in a *mala-khai*. Then a pleasant liquid burned his mouth, and a wheezing voice said in Russian: "You take these fifteen here, the others are all dead." Miller remembered no more.

Nobody has succeeded in learning the name of the Kirghizian who sighted the smoke of the fires on Kara-Ada Island. He may be still alive today, herding sheep in the Ada steppes near Guryev, or extracting salt on the Kara-Bugaz. Nobody knows. His name has been swallowed up by the desert. The nomads carry no passports: they go off into the steppe and cannot be found.

Nobody knows the names of the Kirghizians who lit the fires on Cape Bek-Tash. As they built up the fires they spoke of misfortune, of the appearance of people on the accursed island which was devoid of everything save snakes. On Kara-Ada a man could meet with nothing but disaster.

A boat was needed, but the Kirghizians had none. The boats were far away, in the Kara-Bugaz Strait. There the Russians had built a frame house in which a man with a flowing black beard and a scarred throat was now living.

It was bruited about the nomad camps that this man had a silver tube in his throat. The old men among the Kirghizians were surprised that the *Basmachi* had not yet coveted the precious tube and killed the strange Russian. They had heard tell that the Russian jotted down in his thick book notes on the winds, on the movement of the clouds and the colour of the water, and other such signs. The Russian's doings smacked of the devil. It was obvious that he was a real sorcerer, even though he was kindhearted. He treated the nomads' trachoma and sores and never refused to ferry them across the strait in his rowboat.

The name of the man with the silver throat was Nikolai Remizov. He was the first meteorologist to consent to winter in the temporary meteorological station on the Kara-Bugaz. His sole companion was old Aryants, the watchman.

Remizov's friends were convinced he would never come out of the Kara-Bugaz alive. But six months had passed and he was still safe and sound. No news drifted in from



Russia. Remizov could only guess that a civil war was raging there.

He and Aryants lived after the fashion of Robinson Crusoe. They shot wild geese and fished in the strait. They had a year's supply of flour, sugar, kerosene and tea. All November long they had stocked up *saksaul*, and now their little house was warm and smelled of Aryants' home-baked bread.

"The country is uninhabited for hundreds of kilometres around," Remizov wrote in his diary the day he moved into the frame house from the roomy Turkmenian boats.

Remizov did not consider meteorology an exact science. He called it an art, and he occupied himself not so much with meteorological observations as with the study of the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz and the desert.

He averred that the saying "everything flows, everything changes" was first born in the brain of the desert inhabitant.

"Nothing is constant in the desert," he wrote in his diary. "Here everything is always in motion, although your first impression is that you've entered a dead kingdom of immobility.

"The sands shift, the old tracks are covered up, nomads' tents are pitched and folded, the winds change every hour, the people wander from place to place. The sandy deserts are the only moving expanses of land.

"These are continents that rise into the air during sandstorms, and over the distant lands of Europe they create the unusual colour effects that people call sunsets."

On that January evening Remizov was sitting over his diary and hastily jotting down his conclusions on the settling of Glauber's salt in the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz. At the time he thought these conclusions brilliant. Now they have become axiomatic.

He ascertained to a certainty that Glauber's salt (mirabilite) settles in crystals on the gulf bottom and is in a state of suspension only in winter, when the temperature of the water drops to five degrees above zero. The Kara-Bugaz, that factory of mirabilite, works only in the wintertime—



roughly, from November to March. The winter storms cast ashore huge mountains of mirabilite, hundreds of thousands of tons of it.

In March, as soon as the water grows warmer, the mirabilite dissolves completely. In summer there is no solid mirabilite in the gulf waters.

The summer heat affects the gulf like a stove. It makes the water so thick that later, at five degrees above, the mirabilite begins to crystallize. Summer and winter are equally beneficial for the continual but periodic increase of mirabilite. Remizov drew a parallel between this phenomenon and the rotation of plant life in nature. Every spring trees blossom, and in the autumn they bring forth new fruit. The gulf supplies new millions of tons of mirabilite every winter; it has supplied them for thousands of years and will continue to supply them for thousands of years to come, no matter how many millions of tons are extracted, transported and processed.

"Untold wealth!" Remizov exclaimed, re-reading his fresh notes.

His voice had a strange metallic ring. If the tube in his throat became clogged with saliva he began to wheeze and his high falsetto turned to a deep bass.

Remizov put away his diary and let his mind slip into the realm of fantasy. He assured Aryants that several years hence a bronze monument would be erected to Zherebtsov—the first explorer of the gulf, and Remizov's godfather—on the barren shores of the Kara-Bugaz. Zherebtsov would stand there in his rumpled naval cap. At his feet there would lie an unfolded copper map of the gulf. And the monument would bear the inscription: "To the intrepid explorer of the Kara-Bugaz from Soviet Russia."

Aryants was squatting before the hearth, brewing tea in a pot of brackish water. Suddenly a gun report crackled on the other side of the strait; then a second, and a third.

Remizov stood up.

"Don't go alone, we'll go together," said Aryants.

They went out into the windy night. Someone was shouting across the narrow strait in a throaty voice. Then there was another shot.



Remizov untied his rowboat, fired an answering shot, and put his weight on the oars. Aryants sat glumly in the stern. The shots coming from the northern shore were a call for the rowboat. There had been several such calls, but this was the first time the Kirghizians had ventured near the strait at night, and Aryants was alarmed.

They found two young Kirghizians mounted on prancing steeds. Each held out to Remizov and Aryants a flat, broad palm. Then they both began to speak at the same time. Remizov could make out only one thing: people were perishing on the Island of Kara-Ada. For two days they had been building fires and asking for aid. To help them a Turkmenian sailboat was needed. Nobody knew who they were or how they had got there.

Remizov took one of the Kirghizians along with him and returned to his house. A sailboat was moored at the meteorological station.

They worked furiously for about an hour, attaching the sail. Then they stored two small barrels of water, a bottle of vodka and some fried fish away in the boat and pushed off.

Remizov cried out to Aryants standing on the shore:

“If anything happens set out for Krasnovodsk!”

Aryants waved his hand. What was the use of arguing with a madman?

They emerged from the strait late at night. The sea began to grow rough. Remizov knew that for hundreds of miles around there was not a single vessel, not a single living human soul, nothing but the leaden and deathly cold sea, the night, and the two of them in the creaking Turkmenian sailboat. An involuntary shiver ran down his back.

The warm frame house surrounded by withered weeds, the long days, the loud rifle reports now and again when they shot at wild geese, the five boxes of books (of which only one boxful had been read)—all this remained behind, shut out by the black water.

The Kirghizian advised Remizov to keep farther out to sea—there were submerged rocks near the shore, whole mountains of them, and the boat could easily be shattered to smithereens.



Thus they sailed all night long in the teeth of a gale. At dawn they sighted the jagged black tooth of Kara-Ada. Remizov asked the Kirghizian whether there was a spot near Bek-Tash where they could land. The Kirghizian shook his head doubtfully. This complicated matters. Remizov bit his lip and steered the rearing boat toward the island, where a poison-yellow cloud of smoke suddenly spurted up from a fire.

"They're alive!" The Kirghizian laughed with glee, and shook his head. "Aye, those people are alive!"

Drops of spray glistened on his oily face.

Remizov found many corpses on the island and fourteen men and one woman who were still alive but unconscious. The Kirghizian almost fled in fright. Remizov had to shout at him and threaten him with his gun to bring him to his senses. Then he poured diluted vodka down the throats of the survivors and with the help of the Kirghizian dragged them all into the boat. Miller was the only one to come to.

The others were delirious.

"Who are you?" Remizov asked Miller when the boat, dipping into the waves, sailed off before the wind toward Bek-Tash, where there was a Kirghizian winter camp. "Who is the woman with you? How did you come to be on the island?"

"We haven't had a drop to drink for five days," replied Miller, settling himself in the bottom of the boat. "Five days. All the typhus cases have died. Look what they've done, those bastards. It would have been kinder to shoot us."

"But who are you?" Remizov asked again.

"We are prisoners from Petrovsk. Party members, Red Guards, and some who landed in prison by accident. When the Denikinites fled from Petrovsk they dumped us into the hold of a ship and then put us ashore on that island without water or food."

Remizov said nothing. It had come to the desert, the thing he had secretly feared—civil war, the Bolsheviki, the Whites, typhus, everything that had prevented him



from working on his discoveries and had driven him to hide here on the gulf, through which no more than two-score nomad groups passed once a year, and where there was not a single Russian inhabitant.

"I don't know who the woman is," said Miller. "She was locked up by accident. And that scientist over there is also one of the accidentals. The Whites put him up against the wall three times."

"What scientist?" Remizov asked, turning the wheel to guide the boat around a rocky promontory.

Miller had no time to reply: the boat had entered the surf.

The Kirghizians grabbed hold of it and pulled it up on the shore.

They carried the delirious prisoners to the camp in silence. By nightfall another five had died. In the morning a sixth died. He was an old peasant who had been raving about his home and his native Kuban.

Of the entire group only nine lived through it all. Remizov took them back with him to his meteorological station. Six soon left with some Kirghizians for Krasnovodsk in the hope of reaching a railroad, and three—Miller, Shatsky and the woman—remained with Remizov.

Shatsky smiled slyly to himself all the time. The woman—an Armenian schoolteacher from Rostov—wept interminably.

Remizov had never imagined that anybody could cry for so many days in a row. He handed her over to Aryants' care. The old man muttered simple words of consolation for hours on end, and shook his head sternly at the tales the teacher told.

"The curs, the mad dogs!" he exclaimed. "They ought to be poisoned!"

Miller was the only calm man among them. But even he did not sleep at night and smoked a great deal.

On the third night Shatsky roused Remizov.

"I'm going to tell you something you must keep a dead secret," he said excitedly. "I've made a brilliant discovery, but it mustn't be broadcast or else all mankind will be annihilated by the greatest of world catastrophes. I'm a



geologist. I have come to the conclusion that aside from the enormous material energy concentrated in geological strata there is also the psychic energy of the primordial epochs in which they were formed. Do you understand?"

Remizov sat up on his cot.

"Well?"

"Listen to me carefully. We have found a way of unleashing material energy—oil, coal, shale and ore. All that is very simple. But we don't know how to unleash the psychic energy compressed in those strata. The Americans have discovered how. They hate us. They want to wipe the Soviet State off the face of the earth. They are preparing to uncork the psychic energy contained in the strata lying beneath us. Most of this energy is to be found in limestone and phosphorites.

"The phosphorites are nothing but compressed evil power, they are the primeval brain of twilight, of bestial rage. To save ourselves we must employ degasification. We can release the young and powerful energy of alluvial superstrata to counter the limestone. We must go to Moscow at once and warn the Council of People's Commissars. A cordon must be set up around all the outcrops of limestone and phosphorites. Otherwise we'll perish everywhere, even in so remote a place as the Kara-Bugaz."

Remizov lit a lamp and looked at Shatsky's face. What he saw was the face of an old man, a lion's mask.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-two," replied Shatsky.

Remizov brought the lamp closer to Shatsky's face and examined his pupils: they were motionless, like those of an owl caught in the daytime.

"He's finished," thought Remizov. The east wind whistled above the little house that was keeping vigil over the delirious sleep of the rescued prisoners.

Remizov sat down at his table, opened his diary and wrote:

"February 3, 1920. This evening I spoke to Miller. He suggests that we go to Astrakhan, where Soviet power has firmly entrenched itself. I did not hesitate for a moment. I shall leave Aryants, Shatsky and the schoolteacher here.



The geologist has gone mad. I have neither the right nor the desire to go on studying the gulf and meteorology after what has happened. The time has come when all the 'immutable truths' about the apolitical nature of science, etc., are being swept into the dustbin. Miller will take vengeance. I shall fight with an easy conscience. A damp spring is winging its way over Russia, and I must on no account miss it."

The Denikinites shipped the other prisoners from Petrovsk—about three hundred in all—to the eastern shore of the Caspian, near the Kara-Bugaz. This party of prisoners set out across the desert to Krasnovodsk, four hundred kilometres away. Not long before this the Whites had been ejected from Krasnovodsk by Red units advancing from the direction of Ashkhabad. The city had been taken after a stiff battle in Gypsum Gorge.

The prisoners plodded through a sandstorm that did not abate for a single day. A north wind was blowing. Every hour a few dropped behind the terrible procession that was strung out for several kilometres. They wailed and called for help, but to stop for any length of time meant death.

The women with children, and a lame sailor who had hobbled along with the help of a pair of crutches, were the first to perish. The ones in front were soon lost in the distance, and those straggling behind groped their way blindly through the sheets of sand till nightfall when they dropped, knowing well that they could not hope for help.

Soon the news got about the scattered Turkmenian camps that a "procession of Allah-accursed" was crossing the desert to Krasnovodsk. They hastily folded up their tents and fled to the heart of the steppe.

The prisoners fed on raw lizards and turtles. At rare intervals they stumbled upon wells of foul water. They were led by a Turkmenian guide who knew the desert well, and it was only this circumstance that saved the lives of part of the "procession of the dead."

One of the prisoners was a Georgian schoolteacher named Khaladze, who had participated in the revolutionary upris-



ings in Persia. Another was the famous pilot Barkhudarov, who had smuggled in guns for the insurgents from Astrakhan right under the nose of the Denikinite patrol ships. The Denikinites caught Barkhudarov but they did not get his cargo: he sank his steamer before the patrol ship could catch up with him. In the Petrovsk prison he was given a hundred ramrod strokes and sentenced to be shot. He was not shot, however, but dumped with the other prisoners onto the dead shore near the Kara-Bugaz. There was also an officer of the Anglo-Indian forces named Murtuzalli, who had gone over to the side of the Reds and had been fighting the Denikinites in the guerilla detachments operating in the mountains of Daghestan, and an old scientist by the name of Mukhin, the author of a project entitled "On the Socialization of Natural Deposits."

When they were within eighty kilometres of Krasnovodsk it became clear that all of them could never reach it. Mukhin, who had assumed command of the "procession of the dead," then ordered them to wait for help and not to move. He chose forty of the strongest and pushed on with them to the city, leaving a man at every third or fourth kilometre as a living landmark to guide them back to the others.

Three of these men reached Krasnovodsk. They collapsed on the street, but not before they had told a few passing Red Guards about what had happened in the desert. A half hour later a search party mounted on camels and horses was dispatched to the desert to follow up the living landmarks and locate the group. The majority were saved.

## THE CASE OF WIDOW NACHAR

THE GREY thrushes in the dilapidated cages were dazed by the strong kitchen fumes. Blue heat waves were streaming out from behind the board partition covered with pink wallpaper. The owner of the Tigran Dining Room, looking for all the world like a silver porcupine, was angrily dishing out greasy goulash. The bottled kvass frothed in the sun. The mercury in the thermometers, swelling to bursting point,



had reached the fifty degree mark. It was nine o'clock in the morning.

The steaming goulash that was set before Prokofyev and myself was suggestive of red-hot coke. Lying there on the crooked table, it scorched our face far worse than the blazing Krasnovodsk sun.

Prokofyev glanced at his plate in terror and pushed it away with the prongs of his fork. It was "absolutely out of the question" to eat such a dish, he declared. We drank a bottle each of hot kvass and went out for a dip. All the way the odour of malt pursued us. There was no doubt whatever that it came from ourselves. Prokofyev swore politely. For the first time he, a geologist, a researcher at an oil institute, smelled not of the laboratory or of oil, but of beer.

What can be more refreshing than a swim on such a merciless morning? The waves set soft reflections ashimmer on the white sides of the rowboats. Their green sheen was as delicate as the colour of moonstone. Like little silver pins minnows clung fanwise to a crust of bread floating on the water. One could see to the bottom, the powder-blue sandy bottom, where goggle-eyed gobies darted about angrily. Even the rusty tin cans lying on the bottom seemed made of noble metal.

The sea barely murmured. A hot wind was blowing down on the town from the Ufra cliffs, but it wore itself out by the time it reached the shore.

The morning swim upset all my plans. I was on my way to the Kara-Bugaz, where the construction of a big chemical works—an industrial outpost in the Kara-Kum Desert—was planned. For ten days I had choked in the dust of a railroad coach and been blinded by the dazzling heat as I travelled to Krasnovodsk via Tashkent.

I had made the acquaintance of the Bolshevik geologist Prokofyev the evening before in the Krasnovodsk dormitory of the Kara-Bugaz Sulphate Trust.

We had set the cranky, snorting primus stove going and stretched out on our beds to wait for tea. Prokofyev was familiar with the idiosyncrasies of the primus and asserted categorically that the kettle would take not less than an hour to boil.



When I told him I was going to the Kara-Bugaz, Prokofyev brightened. He got off his bed and began to pace up and down the room.

"First of all," he said, "you must carefully plan your itinerary. We'd better tackle that now."

"What itinerary are you talking about? There's just two hundred kilometres of sea between us and the Kara-Bugaz!"

Prokofyev smiled condescendingly.

"It's two hundred kilometres if you go as a representative of the trust, but you are going there with quite a different aim. I gather that you want to study the problem of the Kara-Bugaz in all its aspects. Am I right? Then your route becomes infinitely more complicated. I have long dreamed about a trip like that and I have it all worked out to the finest detail. But I haven't the money, whereas you have—and so I am letting you have my itinerary gratis."

Verily, this was a new type of scientist-philanthropist!

Each step that Prokofyev took in the dark room evoked an ominous buzz. Thousands of flies were swarming about this tall man whose jerky movements gave them no peace.

"You will have to follow a circuitous route to reach the Kara-Bugaz," Prokofyev continued. "What is the Kara-Bugaz? The world's largest source of Glauber's salt, an inexhaustible source. But that's not the point. The point is how to utilize these riches. The Kara-Bugaz has the salt, but it has no coal, no oil, no water, no natural gas. It has none of the other requisites for processing the salt into valuable chemical products, and hence it would seem that a chemical works is out of the question. But coal, oil, water and natural gas lie along a broad curve around the gulf. Before you begin to study the gulf you must study the approaches to it, just as you would study building materials before you set out to build. And this is what my itinerary is based on."

The kettle came to a boil. At this point Khorobrykh and Barkhin came in. The former was an engineer and the latter a topographer. Khorobrykh at once snatched the initiative of the conversation out of Prokofyev's soft hands. He was a tall man with a military bearing and a face



like Chaliapin's. He was in charge of the survey work for a highway being built from Krasnovodsk to the Kara-Bugaz.

I observed Khorobrykh for several days. He worked like a general at the front, even though his entire army consisted of Korchagin, the business manager, a few Young Communist topographers, five Turkmenian labourers and four camels. This tiny army acted swiftly and surely, however. Khorobrykh's instructions were notable for their conciseness. They reminded one of Napoleon's famous speech: "Soldiers, forty centuries look down on you from the heights of the pyramids!"

His orders—unfortunately they have not been recorded anywhere—were filled with the grimness and grandeur of the desert. He would thunder out: "Topographers! You must reach the bitter springs of Kosh-Aji, and keep to the wells where, according to the inscriptions of Tamerlane's time carved on the cliffs, one may quench the thirst of a hundred camels. You must then forge ahead to the northwest, but bear in mind that distances in those parts are very often distorted by the reflections of the salt lakes."

Khorobrykh had spent his whole life in Central Asia. He had fought in the Civil War, and habits of those days still stuck to him—he was a man of lightning decisions, daring exploits and external gruffness.

In the winter he rode to the Kara-Bugaz on horseback across the desert, and in the autumn he sailed to Baku in a Turkmenian boat. None of the other engineers had ever risked it. The voyage, lasting almost a month, was too much like taunting death.

Khorobrykh had written an article about the seaworthiness of these boats and a regional natural history journal in Ashkhabad had published it. According to his article, the Turkmenian boats were sturdier than steamers and faster than motor boats. More than anything else Khorobrykh prized the fact that the boats were not caulked—the boards were fitted together with exceptional accuracy. Only one thing disturbed him: when they entered the waters of the Kara-Bugaz the Turkmenian boats often sprang big leaks and sometimes even went to the bottom.



Khorobrykh studied this phenomenon—not out of curiosity but because Glauber's salt was delivered from the distant workings to the strait by boat. The reason for the leakage was to be sought in the waters of the Kara-Bugaz and in the fact that all wood, even the driest, contains a certain amount of moisture. The waters of the Kara-Bugaz, Khorobrykh explained, are a saturated salt solution. They immediately suck the moisture out of the boat's sides, the seams between the boards widen, and the boat naturally sinks. Khorobrykh firmly adhered to this theory.

The rest of the evening was spent in arguing about why the Turkmenian boats leak and in listening to Khorobrykh tell the history of the exploration of the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz. Khorobrykh had first visited the Kara-Bugaz in 1914 and with full justification considered himself a Kara-Bugaz old-timer.

Prokofyev had no chance to talk to me about the itinerary that evening. We finished our conversation the next morning at the water's edge.

"Your itinerary should be as follows," he said, sitting in the shade on the steps of the dressing booth. "First Krasnovodsk, where you happen to be at present, then Berikei and Makhach-Kala in Daghestan, then the Emba area and the Mangyshlak Peninsula, and only after that will you have the right to go on to the Kara-Bugaz. Altogether three thousand kilometres in the Caspian Sea and a few hundred kilometres overland. The Krasnovodsk district is rich in oil and natural gas. Daghestan—in gas, the Emba area—in oil and limestone, and the Mangyshlak Peninsula—in coal, phosphorites and oil. All these are needed to turn the Kara-Bugaz's mirabilite into valuable chemical products. Without them there's no sense in building a chemical works. Well, do you agree?"

"I do."

Prokofyev dived into the water. Myriads of little bubbles frothed up all around his body as it pushed air down with it almost to the very bottom.

Khorobrykh plopped into the water from the neighbouring booth. "'Lo there, my eagles!" he shouted, striking out for the Ufra cliffs. He submerged himself in the silvery



sparkling water as in some strange ocean of light. A tanker with a canary-coloured funnel bore down on him. In huge black letters on its bridge was the name *Lafargue*.

The heat lay like a pink veil over the dead hills and sandy spits that glimmered from afar like vast, unexplored continents.

In the evening I met Prokofyev in the New Town, on the other side of the railroad station. The streets ended in glowering reddish cliffs.

Prokofyev told me the latest news: the co-operative dining room had received a shipment of Jebel spring water. We hurried off to the dining room. We considered the water from the distilleries to be worse than castor oil. It was thick and cloudy, tinted brown by some kind of flakes that settled reluctantly to the bottom, and it smelled of kerosene. Drinking it was useless: it hardly quenched the thirst. Khorobrykh alone required two buckets a day, whereas the ration was a bucket per person, since one of the distilleries was undergoing repairs.

The water crisis was evidenced by the inanimate lines of empty buckets strung along in a spiral around the water booths. Haughty camels trod unceremoniously upon the buckets that the housewives had left in the safekeeping of an old Turkmenian philosopher. A deafening clatter rolled through the streets; the old Turkmenian was whipping the bluish sides of the camels, while the housewives, red as stokers, waddled hastily up to their buckets, calling down curses on the heads of the camels, the philosopher and the Department of Municipal Services.

On the way we ran into Khorobrykh. He responded to our news about the Jebel water with an indifferent mien, although he agreed briskly enough to join us. True engineer and Central Asian that he was, he took pains to explain to us that the water from the distilleries was not a whit worse than spring water.

In the dining room the customers were ordering tea wholesale—five, eight and even ten glasses at a time. Barkhin and Korchagin were sitting in the midst of clouds of aromatic steam and guzzling a box of sweetmeats. Music floated in



from the movie house across the way. The pianist there was in a blue mood and was playing something lyrical. The day's dust was lying peacefully on the streets instead of sweeping along in whining little whirlwinds.

The air was pure. In the greenish sky the stars were hanging low, touching the roof tops. Even in the East there are evenings that call to mind one of our painters' Oriental landscapes, and Oriental verse. Barkhin gazed up at the sky and murmured:

"Scheherazade."

"What about Scheherazade?" Khorobrykh inquired sternly.

"The sky."

"Why Scheherazade?"

"The Arabian word 'Scheherazade' is like our word 'maze'," Prokofyev intervened gently. "Barkhin, that's an interesting association: Scheherazade—maze. Look at the sky: what a huge labyrinth of stars of all magnitudes!"

"Put a nightingale in that labyrinth, and let it sing," said Khorobrykh. "Oh, you nightingales of Shiraz and roses of Khorasan! Oh, Zuleika, lily of the valley of Iran!"

Khorobrykh was making fun of trite Oriental exotics. He loved a different East—the reddish sands, the blossoming cotton, the postal camels, called *narrs*, the shrubs of *tausaghyz*, the Hindu-Kush Dam, and the distilleries. He had respect for the mosques of Samarkand, but only in so far as their architecture was concerned. He regarded the poems of Saadi as nothing but the attempts of a sly old Persian to plague naive shahs. Of all Saadi's sayings he valued only one, which he often repeated to his topographers:

"If you walk with a lame man, hobble too, so that his lameness is not so noticeable."

This, the height of Oriental courtesy, amused Khorobrykh.

"In the name of Allah the benign and the merciful, better drink your tea," he proposed to Prokofyev, "and tell us by the way about your work in Chikishliar. That's a far more interesting topic."

In the evening gloom Prokofyev's sunburnt face in the dusty, horn-rimmed glasses seemed almost black.



"Yes, Chikishliar!" Prokofyev replied. "There's oil at every step there. Whole acres of land are flooded with oil. Baku pales before Chikishliar. Noble gases gush out of all the cracks in the ground."

"There, there," Khorobrykh murmured soothingly. "I suppose there isn't a better place in the world than your Chikishliar."

"Let's be serious. For two years now I've been shouting myself blue in the face at all the meetings and conferences about Chikishliar, Cheleken and Baya-Dag. Mostly about Chikishliar, of course. You know very well that I've spent three years of difficult and painstaking prospecting at Chikishliar and have earned the right to speak of the place with full authority."

Now Prokofyev was worked up, and he launched into an interesting story about Chikishliar.

I have a weakness for wanting to get as many people as possible to write. One often comes across people who have had quite a few interesting experiences in life. They lug their experiences with them wherever they go and fritter it away, telling their stories to chance fellow travellers, or, still worse, not telling them at all.

Regret at the quantity of splendid material going to waste haunts me continually. I keep begging people to write down their experiences, but almost always I come up against disbelief in their ability to write, or shyness, or ironical smiles. The superficial idea that writing is a frivolous and undignified occupation still sticks like a fishbone in the minds of a great many people. The majority refer to their strict partiality for the truth, considering that writing is simply lying. They do not even suspect that a fact presented in literary form, shorn of all unnecessary details, embellished by a colourful depiction of its characteristic features, and illuminated by the faintest glow of invention, reveals the essence of things a hundred times more succulently and clearly than the most truthful and exact of records.

After hearing Prokofyev's story I suggested that he write it down. Contrary to my fears he readily agreed.

He was waiting for the Kara-Bugaz boat to arrive. It was being held up in Hassan-Kuli, and even the port master



himself could not say when it would be coming in. Not for a week, in any case, he thought.

Prokofyev gave himself two days to put down his story. But he soon found it impossible to write in the dormitory. The topographers began to evince a heightened interest in his writing experiment and vied with one another in sharp-witted remarks about "sacred inspiration" and "the laurels of Sholokhov" that were "giving Prokofyev no peace of mind." So in the morning he went off to a friend's place in the New Town and worked away in his cool room. In the evening he returned to the dormitory and then the lot of us would go swimming at the outskirts of town.

Night, as black as soot and shrouded in deep silence, descended over sea and shore. We could not see the water, we could only feel its coolness on our hot bodies. Gradually our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and the starlight began to shower down all around; it dropped on the water and caused it to glimmer faintly. Standing up to our waist in the water, we clearly visualized ourselves in an open and shallow tropical sea.

The port lights lay motionless on the water, like the blue eyes of deepwater fish emerging at midnight to gaze at the stars. The sea gave off a pungent odour, like that of orchards watered abundantly at daybreak. It had a strong whiff of salt and oysters.

Prokofyev, fumbling with his clothes in the pitch-darkness, was saying that writing was the most difficult and interesting occupation in the world and that if he weren't a geologist he would most certainly take up writing. Already the two days he had given himself to jot down his story were not enough. He begged me for another two days, which meant that I would miss my Baku boat (according to Prokofyev's itinerary I had to go to Daghestan). We argued for a long time, but finally I was forced to give in.

Prokofyev gave me his story the day before I sailed. He was strongly averse to my reading it in his presence. False modesty still retained a hold on him. The story was entitled *Black Rivers*.



"Three years ago I was greatly intrigued by a strange phenomenon on Cheleken Island. It appeared that oil (true, in small quantities) had been extracted on the island for thirty years already, whereas according to existing geological data the deposits there were insignificant and should have been exhausted after the first ten or fifteen years.

"One of our scientific institutions, on the insistence of its Party organization, sent me down to Cheleken to investigate the matter.

"It was my first visit to Central Asia. I was surprised to find the places I visited so desolate. They are mentioned quite frequently in scientific literature and I had expected to find them more populated.

"A short stay on Cheleken Island convinced me that the root of the inexhaustibility of its oil deposits must be sought on the continent, roughly in the district of Chikishliar, Hassan-Kuli and Atrek.

"I set out for that district. Off Hassan-Kuli the passengers were transferred to flat-bottomed feluccas, and when we came to within a kilometre of the shore we were transferred to bullock carts which finally carried us out to the shallow water and onto the flat sandy beach.

"I found the heat exceedingly oppressive and I felt thirsty and alarmed. The smell of putrid fish stifled me. I was overcome by the feeling experienced by every newcomer to the East. It can be called a 'yearning for things familiar.' The cool laboratories of my institute and the dense foliage of Leningrad's gardens that cast dark green shadows on the rooms were like paradise lost. I began to doubt the existence of birch groves, of rivers strewn with water lilies, of slow steady rains, of grass. The existence of grass seemed particularly improbable, so bare and stony was the ground in those parts.

"I had been to Baku, had lived in Grozny and in the Emba fields, and as a geologist I knew that oil deposits lie in the dried beds of former gulfs, in places usually barren and wild. The dreariness of the locality in which I found myself seemed to me in itself sufficient proof of the presence of large oil deposits.



"I took up my abode in the aul of Kuljar with a native *tabib*, or medicine man. He was a brown and rather pompous little old Turkmenian who considered me a quack specializing in oil and other minerals and therefore a sort of colleague of his. The *tabib* was forced to conceal his practice from the uninitiated. 'The dogs are already sniffing about my house,' he used to say, hinting at the members of the aul Soviet.

"When I came to Kuljar the aul had been standing in one place a year already and was surrounded by a belt of evil-smelling garbage and filth. I did not know then that an aul never remains in one place for more than a year and a half or two. After this it becomes so foul that it willy-nilly must move to a new location.

"I plunged headlong into my work. Many perhaps have no knowledge of the theory of primary and secondary oil. The gist of this theory consists in that oil, originating in one place, makes long journeys underground, usually from deep-lying strata to strata lying closer to the surface, moving through voids and porous substances in the direction offering the least resistance. A salient role in this is played by the pressure of oil gases.

"According to my observations, in the case of Cheleken we have a classical example of such a movement. I have forgotten to mention that the oil found in the place of its formation is called primary, whereas that found far from the place of its formation, or migrating oil, is called secondary. The Cheleken oil is secondary and keeps pouring into the strata there from some place else. Herein lies the explanation of the inexhaustibility of the Cheleken deposits. But where is the birthplace of this oil? This question interested me very much. The Soviet Union stood to benefit considerably from its solution.

"I had much difficulty finding workers. The Turkmenians of my aul belong to the tribe of Igdyr, which had always owned countless herds and was known for its laziness and superstitions. After the Revolution only the youth have begun to work. To this day the old men regard work as something beneath their dignity. They idle away their time smoking and playing dice. The women do almost all the work.



"The *tabib* went out of his way to bring me *teriakeshes*, smokers of a filthy kind of opium, as workers. They were unreliable and insensate. At times it was impossible to make them budge. Only a month later, in a youth named Guzar, did I find a brisk and clever, though terribly curious, assistant. Guzar was interested in absolutely everything, and I was obliged to explain to him even the theory of primary and secondary oil. In his eyes I was a great Bolshevik scientist conversant with the origin of miracles and far more estimable than the *evlyads*, or descendants of the Prophet, who were living out their days in the aul.

"The *tabib* plagued my life slowly but relentlessly. In his heart of hearts he hated the Bolsheviks, and when speaking of the Revolution he uttered the ancient proverb with a sigh: 'When the caravan turns, the lame camel comes out in front,' signifying by the lame camel the poor, who had come to power.

"He drove me wild with his methods of healing. He brewed red pepper in camel's milk and smeared this poisonous mess on the eyelids of trachoma sufferers. He treated syphilis with a powder pounded out of the dried head of a lizard mixed with tobacco, which the patients were supposed to smoke. He cured sores by applying a compress of the warm flesh of freshly killed lizards or puppies. His most barbaric treatment, however, was of dysentery. Many children died of this disease during the summer. The *tabib* would twist the patient's navel with all his might, paying no heed to his cries of pain. This treatment usually ended in a rupture.

"The *tabib* knew only four illnesses—trachoma, dysentery, syphilis and tuberculosis of the glands. He catalogued all other ailments as heart diseases and treated them by cauterization. His method of cauterization was nothing less than refined torture. A smouldering pad of camel's wool would be bound tightly to the patient's side. When the burn had grown to the required size, the *tabib* would remove the pad and place a compress of urine in its stead. The *tabib* did not recognize women's diseases as such, saying that if they did exist at all, they were sent down by Allah as punishment for disobedience.



"I stood this for two weeks. Then I sent a messenger off to Chikishliar with a demand that the *tabib* be stopped from crippling people.

"Shortly after, I went up into the mountains. Here I made a discovery of such importance that I forgot all about the *tabib*.

"Before leaving for the mountains, I had removed to the dwelling of the widow Nachar, who in turn moved into a tent a few yards away. I was quite pleased with my new home. It was very clean and stood at a distance from the aul, beyond the area of stench and dead pups, and in the zone of the blustering hot winds blowing down from the distant mountains.

"At the foot of the mountains I found several outcrops of gas and, after some investigation, finally convinced myself that I had located the centre of rich deposits of primary oil from which, I conjectured, underground streams slowly flowed in two directions: to Cheleken Island, and to Nebit-Dag (Neftedag).

"At that time the problem of the Kara-Bugaz, or, in other words, the problem of extracting and processing the largest deposits of mirabilite in the world, had already been posed in all its various aspects. What interested me chiefly was the problem of processing the mirabilite. The idea of building a huge chemical works on the Kara-Bugaz was already in the air. But such a works was impossible without the three basic components: raw material, fuel and water.

"The Kara-Bugaz had the raw material—mirabilite. But it did not have the fuel or water. I have discovered vast gas-bearing lands—I cannot even approximately estimate the resources of the Chikishliar district—and I am certain that thereby I have solved to a large extent the problem of fuel for the works, since long-distance delivery of gas is something American engineering has solved long ago.

"Besides the gas outlets I discovered rich deposits of iodine and bromide.

"One part of the fuel problem was solved, but there still remained the other part—oil.

"Here there were no doubts or protracted speculation.



The whole region was like a sponge saturated with oil. But this oil, like that of Cheleken Island, was too far away from the Kara-Bugaz and lay deep beneath the surface. Nebit-Dag (Neftedag) was closer. The best way out would be to pipe Nebit-Dag oil to the Kara-Bugaz.

"Early one morning I was sitting near my tent reflecting upon this matter when Guzar came up in a state of extreme agitation and told me that two of the *teriakeshes* had found a deserted mosque on the other side of the hill and that we ought to move into it.

"Guzar begged me to go at once and have a look at our new dwelling.

"It was with a feeling of annoyance that I followed Guzar, for he had disrupted my train of thought. I had been thinking about how to determine, knowing as I did more or less accurately the directions in which the oil streams I had discovered were flowing, where to look for oil in the vicinity of the Kara-Bugaz. I had to locate the points where I was most likely to come across oil, in other words, to find the shortest line between the Kara-Bugaz and the oil zone, spreading northward, which, in my estimation merged with the Mangyshlak and Emba fields.

"We climbed up the hill. I had expected to see a ruined mosque with crumbling tiles, the colour of blue vitriol, but what I actually saw was a squat adobe building, dingy and uninviting. The *teriakeshes* were sitting at the entrance and smirking. They glowered at us when Guzar and I brushed past them and entered the mosque. I had firmly resolved not to move into the place. Guzar's idea was really too ridiculous.

"On coming into the mosque I was taken aback. Sitting by a wall under the wrecked roof, through which thick shafts of straw-coloured sunlight were streaming, was a poorly dressed woman in a shawl which covered her whole face but for the eyes. She was moaning softly. On the ground at her side slept a little boy.

"'Nachar has come to us for help,' Guzar muttered in embarrassment. I could not restrain a smile at this childish ruse to get me to come to the mosque.

"'All right, translate,' I said.

"Nachar threw off her shawl and began to speak very



rapidly, stretching out her withered blue arms to us. Tears trickled from her eyes. She spoke long and passionately. She tore her necklace of copper coins off her neck and flung it to the ground at my feet. Guzar plied her with questions and argued with her. They were both agitated, and their voices sounded like the chattering of birds.

"As I studied Nachar's face I was struck by its beauty and its deep lines of suffering. I had come to imagine all Turkmenian women as having broad, angular faces marred by hard drudgery.

"At length Nachar fell silent. She drew her shawl over her mouth and leaned back against the wall.

"Guzar then began to translate. I was burning with impatience and could hardly wait for him to finish. Knowing a little about the native customs, I realized that only something highly extraordinary could have made a Turkmenian woman come to a Russian for assistance.

"Guzar translated haltingly. It appeared that Nachar was not a Turkmenian but an Afghan woman. Twenty years ago, at the age of three, she had been kidnapped and sold off to a poor inhabitant of the aul of Kuljar named Murad.

"When she turned fourteen Murad married her. The whole aul hated her as an alien. Murad had beaten her for not having a child during her first year of marriage. At length she gave birth to a boy and life became a little easier—the Turkmenians consider it a good omen if the first child is a boy. A girl was born next and Murad died soon after. Then the whole aul commenced to persecute her. Her entire flock of sheep was taken away from her in accordance with the Law of the Sharia. She had owned only fifty sheep. Then, a month ago, her little girl was kidnapped and sold off to someone. And the boys of the aul pelted her with camels' droppings.

"She made a round of all the tents, begging the people with tears in her eyes to tell her where her daughter was, but everywhere the men met her with blows. One night she stole off with her boy and set out for Krasnovodsk. She had intended to bring the matter up before a Bolshevik court and the Russian women who were defending the Turkmenian women from their husbands, but she was overtaken not far



from the aul, beaten up and returned. Yesterday three *ev-lyads* and the *tabib* had visited her, called her a lewd she-goat, because, they said, she was consorting with a Russian, and threatened to kill them both. Then they ripped the roof off the Russian's abode and went away.

"'They'll kill her,' said Guzar trembling violently. 'Comrade Prokofyev, we cannot go back to the aul. They will kill the whole lot of us.'

"I did not say anything. All my scientific problems had dropped out of my head. I was gripped by only one feeling—rage. It made all my muscles ache. I strode out of the mosque and told the grinning *teriakeshes* to feed the woman and to fold up the tents. 'We are moving to a new place,' I snapped.

"'Let her croak, the old Afghan witch,' replied the older *teriakesh*, baring his yellow horse teeth.

"Then I, a geologist, an employee of one of the leading scientific institutions of the U.S.S.R., grabbed the collar of his robe and jerked it so hard that his tall fur hat went flying from his close-shaven head.

"'Did you hear what I said, you dog?' I shouted in a voice that I myself did not recognize.

"The *teriakesh* knelt down and closed his eyes tight, as though he were expecting to be shot.

"Three hours later we set out for Hassan-Kuli, taking Nachar and her boy along with us. Thus ended my first expedition to the Atrek district. I was glad at least that all this had happened after I had finished the bulk of my work. All that remained now was to clear up some small questions of no special consequence.

"One of the *teriakeshes* disappeared on the way. We spent the night in the desert. I stayed up till morning, but I heard nothing save the scurrying of lizards.

"Next day we reached Hassan-Kuli. I paid the *teriakeshes* and let them go. On my hands now were my expedition data, which had to be worked up, and three people—Guzar, the widow, and her four-year-old boy, who had placed all their hopes in me. There was plenty to worry about. I decided to take them to Krasnovodsk, and then see what I would see.



"In Krasnovodsk I deposited Guzar in a boarding school for Turkmenians and took Nachar to the District Committee of the Party. I was received by Comrade Baril, the manager of the women's welfare department, a strong-willed fiery little ex-seamstress whose pince-nez kept slipping off her nose. Her face turned a blotchy red when she heard my story.

"'You're a brick,' she said with shining eyes. 'Leave this woman with me, we'll fix everything up.'

"She held out a firm hand to me in parting. I left with a feeling of relief.

"A week later I received a letter from the Presiding Judge of the Court notifying me that I was appointed public co-prosecutor in the case 'Concerning the survivals of barbarian customs as manifested in the persecution and outrageous treatment of Citizeness Nachar.'

"The judge also informed me that the *tabib* and six old *evlyads* had been arrested and brought to Krasnovodsk. The investigation was drawing to an end and the trial would soon open. I spent the few days remaining before the trial not in preparing a speech for the prosecution but in writing a report on the utilization of the Chikishliar natural gas deposits.

"In this report I emphasized the necessity of continuing prospecting in the Chikishliar district on a much larger scale than my work. It was necessary to drill to a depth of a thousand or more metres. The gas wells should be sunk very carefully and only when the gas could be utilized. Otherwise millions of cubic metres of gas would be wasted. It is very difficult to cork up a gas well. The gas can almost always force a passage and rush along the sides of the pipes, as happened in Daghestan.

"Next year I shall return to Chikishliar district to draw up an estimate of the gas resources there. There are two very simple and interesting methods of doing this. The first consists in determining the volume of the pores and voids in the gas-bearing strata, which will be equal to the volume of gas, since the gas fills these spaces. This method affords only a rough estimate. The second method—the so-called 'method of reduced pressure' consists in determining the decrease in the pressure of gas issuing from the



well. If the output of the well is known, the subterranean supply of gas can be estimated. This is done as follows: Let us suppose that after yielding a hundred thousand cubic metres of gas a well registers a pressure one-tenth less than originally. Then the subterranean supply of gas in that well will constitute nine-tenths of the yield, or nine hundred thousand cubic metres.

"Such, in general outline, were the salient points of my report. Then came the trial.

"The courthouse in Krasnovodsk is the only building whose front garden boasts flowers having dusty bitter-smelling yellow blossoms and rough grey leaves.

"I don't remember what I said. I believe I said that half the Turkmenian women are barren as a result of hard labour, that the October Revolution alone had torn away the shawls with which the young Turkmenian girls bound their mouths as a sign that a woman must be silent all her life. I demanded that the women be forbidden to wear the national headdress, which weighs about three kilograms and causes tuberculosis of the neck vertebrae.

"The defendants stared glumly at the points of their beards. The *tabib* refused his last word, motivating his refusal with a stilted proverb. 'A Turkmenian,' he said, 'may not be too lazy to fight but he may be too lazy to speak.'

"The sentence was stern: five years' imprisonment for each, with confiscation of their belongings and deportation from the Turkmenian republic upon their release.

"I saw Nachar in the courtroom. She had discarded her shawl and was wearing a European dress.

"'Dear Comrade,' Baril said to me, 'just look at her! What a ravishing beauty she is! My dress never fitted me like that. I'm going to send her to a clothing factory in Baku. But she must first learn not to shy away from men and autos.'

"And here is where I can put a full stop. I must only add that my intervention in the lives of people gave me as much anxiety and joy as my oil prospecting on Cheleken Island and in the Chikishliar district."

"Will there be a continuation to this story?" I asked Prokofyev.



"I'm afraid you yourself will have to take part in the continuation," he replied. "You are leaving tomorrow, and Baril is sending Nachar to Baku on tomorrow's boat. Would you mind looking after her on the way and seeing her to her destination in Baku?"

"Prokofyev!" I exclaimed. "You keep sending me farther and farther away from the Kara-Bugaz!"

He chuckled.

"Not at all. Everything is imperceptibly linked up with the gulf. Baril will be going to the Kara-Bugaz in a few days to work among the Turkmenians and Cossacks. You'll see her there, and she'll tell you and show you a host of interesting things."

The next day ashy grey clouds came sailing over the hills. A micaceous sun poured oceans of white heat over the green sea. Mangy dogs with clever yellow eyes sniffed at the dusty piles of bundles and suitcases standing on the wharf and growled soft threats at one another.

The s.s. *Chicherin* turned her disproportionately high bow into the turbulent wastes of the sea. Prokofyev was standing on the wharf waving his faded hat. He kept waving it and calling out to me to visit the geologist Shatsky at Makhach-Kala without fail.

Baril was there too, shouting to me and pointing to Nachar: "See that she doesn't drown!" Khorobrykh was puffing at his old pipe and waving his hand at me with the mien of a kindly disposed superior watching to see that his instructions were being carried out to the letter. I could not help feeling like his subordinate at that moment. I understood what the topographers meant when they said that working with Khorobrykh was "like working behind a concrete wall."

Korchagin came panting up at the last moment. He had not been able to find any camel saddles for the prospecting party anywhere, and he had dragged his disappointment down with him to the wharf, where it was shattered by Khorobrykh's inflexible will. "You've got to find them, and you will. Let's go together," he said. I saw them walk out through the grilled wharf gates and climb the hill, where,



amid withered yellow flowers, stood the low white building of the city Soviet.

The city and the grim jagged hills quickly rolled off to the left. The waves began a disorderly dance about the red buoys. The wind rose. Slowly and majestically the *Chicherin*, spurting smoke and flapping her flag and deck awnings, trembling violently and making a great deal of noise, dipped her bow into the broad waves rolling in gaily from the sea.

Late in the afternoon the sea grew calm and a sunset flared up in the west. Flashes of lightning sped across the sky like blue shells, directly over the sea and below the setting sun. The ship was wrapped in silence.

I brought the timorous Nachar some tea. We sat down on deck, looking for all the world like a family of Spaniards fussing over the unfamiliar ceremony of tea drinking. Nachar was wearing an old silk dress of Baril's, a light-coloured pair of stockings and a white scarf. A sailor of nondescript appearance stood nearby strumming an old guitar.

Nachar already knew a few words of Russian, but she spoke them blushing, and in a whisper. After tea she covered the lower part of her face with the scarf and sat motionlessly gazing out at the sea. She must have sat thus the whole night long, for in the morning when we drew near to the bright yellow shores of the Apsheron Peninsula, I found her in the same position.

Toward noon the distant piles of Baku—its grey mountains, grey sky, grey houses covered with patches of gleaming grey sunlight—loomed over the dull waters. We passed Nargen Island and Cape Zykh, and the entire dull-gleaming town, a magnet for the avaricious stares of various Standard Oils and Royal Dutches, this city of revolution, oil, and the 26 commissars, \* piled higher and higher over the rain-

\* In September 1918, after the fall of Soviet power in Baku, twenty-six eminent leaders of Baku, among whom were such outstanding workers of the Bolshevik Party as Stepan Shaumyan, Prokofy Dzhaparidze, Fioletov, etc., were arrested and shot in the sands of Turkmenia by order of the Command of the British Occupational Troops.—*Trans.*



bow-spanned expanse of the gulf until the *Chicherin* drew directly up to it and sounded her sonorous blast.

I took Nachar to the address Baril had given me and handed her over to the women's welfare organizer at Clothing Factory No. 3, a friendly, absent-minded young seamstress.

In the evening a hot dusty train bore me north to Daghestan, where one of the pages of the future history of the Kara-Bugaz was in the making.

## LEARN FROM THE SEaweeds

"The sun, for thousands of years the bane of the desert, will become its blessing."

*Academician Joffe.*

THREE thousand kilometres have been left behind. I am now living in a plywood house on the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz. The merciless sun labours from morning till night, evaporating and thickening the waters of the Kara-Bugaz. It does not let me concentrate on the highlights of my long journey around the Caspian Sea.

A whole cosmos has passed before my eyes. Now it remains in my memory and in my pages of lightly pencilled notes.

After Baku the train plunged at dawn into the fragrant groves of Berikei. In the west, where lay Khunzakh and Veden, and the auls wrapped in the romantic haze of Shamil legends, the mountains glowed a burnished gold. At their base nestled the Daghestan Lights Glassworks—the first plant in the Soviet Union to operate on natural gas. The gas is used to heat the works' glass furnaces. The raw material for the manufacture of the glass—mirabilite—is shipped in from the Kara-Bugaz.

In Baku I learned that pending construction of the chemical works on the Kara-Bugaz, processing of the mirabilite would be carried out in Daghestan. But where? Here, in Berikei, where the earth spouts gas like a new gas works, or up north, in Chir-Yurt?



The consensus of opinion inclines in favour of Chir-Yurt, where the erection of a big chemical works is projected.

The works is to go up near Chir-Yurt Station, between Grozny and Makhach-Kala, at the point where the railroad crosses the Sulak River.

That sparkling blue heart of the Daghestan mountains—the Sulak Power Plant—will transmit electricity here. Nearby lies smoky Grozny, with its mazut and its oil gases. Here too are the port of Makhach-Kala, to which mirabilite can be delivered by sea from the Kara-Bugaz, and the railroad leading to Rostov and Novorossiisk, the exit to the centre of the country and to the Black Sea.

Makhach-Kala is a town that seems to be built of petrified foam.

The mica grains in the stones of the quays and buildings glisten like large drops of spray.

The sea rolls green, deep waters to the foot of the town.

The bobbing black bowsprits of sailing vessels tower over the low fence of the railroad station and almost touch the semaphores. For ten minutes the cars of the Tiflis-Moscow express turn into ship cabins. Through their windows one can see a maze of sailyards, riggings and yellow funnels. The gusty Caspian wind rushes into the compartments. Little boys cluster round the passengers wilting from the hot, clear southern weather, and wave bunches of freshly-caught gobies, smelling of the cool sea and of iodine, in their faces.

In Makhach-Kala I found a guide for myself. Find yourself a guide in each city you visit, otherwise the new places will produce no more impression upon you than a dull museum. The guide must be a native of the town. He will plunge you headlong into a fresh, unfamiliar world.

In spite of himself he will sing the town's praises, although he usually calls it a lousy hole and a hick town. Such is the nature of a native. In the presence of guests the tiresome old places reveal their true essence and scintillate with new colours. A most interesting world suddenly unfolds before the guests' wondrous eyes, and dusty Makhach-Kala appears as a town washed with ozone and rains, and sprayed to the roof tops by the surf—as a town of great possibilities and great achievements.



The misty hills of Daghestan step down until they stand side by side with the whitewashed little houses of the town. The recent history of the *Gazavat*, the heroic death of Makhach Dakhadayev, the battles with the Mussavatists, the history of the October Proletarian Revolution, which rolled down from the mountains to the malaria-infested plains—and the town comes alive, begins to hum, like the winds hum over the shore. You sense the blossoming of a young republic, suggestive of the blossoming of the cherry orchards of Bui-naksk, which have no equal in the whole of the Land of Soviets.

My guide was a local newspaperman named Krasnogorsky, a greying little man in horn-rimmed glasses. He was born in Minsk, but he regarded Daghestan as his second homeland. He spoke of it as a country of untold riches, and he sighed so heavily one would think that he, Krasnogorsky, was forced to bear all those riches on his narrow shoulders.

I travelled with Krasnogorsky to the nearby Turalinsk Salt Lakes, and together we visited the geologist Shatsky.

The Turalinsk Lakes—Big and Small—are otherwise called the “Artificial Kara-Bugaz.” It was in these lakes that the Academy of Sciences tested a new method of accelerating the precipitation of mirabilite from the water.

In the Kara-Bugaz the mirabilite crystallizes and settles to the bottom in natural conditions. The precipitation of mirabilite takes place in the winter, when the temperature of the water falls to five degrees above zero Centigrade. The salt spreads over the bottom in uneven layers and covers the vast area of 18,000 square kilometres.

The winter storms cast mirabilite out on the shore. Before 1929 the extraction of mirabilite consisted in moving it farther up on the beach to prevent the surf from washing it back. Then, when it had dried, it was loaded on camels and brought to the sea. That was the situation up to 1929, when the Kara-Bugaz Trust commenced to operate.

The trust could not let the extraction of mirabilite remain at the mercy of the gulf’s caprices, as had the manufacturers of old: “whatever the storm throws up will have to do.” Nor could the trust tolerate the fact that the gulf was casting mirabilite out on inconveniently located shores



over a stretch of 150 kilometres, that it was mixing it with clay, covering it with seaweed and rotting fish, and then lapping it up in the spring to dissolve it once more in the sun-warmed waters.

New extraction methods were needed which would afford pure mirabilite in places easy to reach and convenient for drying. Such methods were the extraction of mirabilite directly from the gulf bottom with the aid of excavators and suction machines, and basinization. This consisted in pumping the water of the gulf into basins, where it evaporated, concentrated and produced a highly pure mirabilite in the winter.

It was this latter method that was put to the test in the Turalinsk Salt Lakes. A section of Small Turalinsk Lake was dammed off and turned into a huge basin, ten acres in area, into which water was pumped from the Big Lake. A layer of water 2 metres 65 centimetres deep produced a 55-centimetre layer of mirabilite.

The experiments were crowned with brilliant success: the quantity of mirabilite obtained corresponded exactly to that calculated.

The Turalinsk salt workings are now functioning and producing mirabilite, though they cannot, of course, come anywhere near the real Kara-Bugaz, that giant condenser of the Caspian waters.

I kept in mind Prokofyev's request that I visit the geologist Shatsky. He lived at the fringe of the town, on a street that streamed downhill like a broad river. Mountaineers in tattered slippers shuffled through the warm dust of the street, tapping the hilts of their black daggers with yellow fingernails. Donkeys jolted along laden with milk cans that were balanced by chubby infants tucked into carpet bags.

Krasnogorsky came with me. He knew who Shatsky was, but did not know the reason for his recent illness or the story about Kara-Ada Island.

We were welcomed by a hospitable, clean-shaven old man with laughing eyes. This was Shatsky himself. His wife, an Armenian schoolteacher, was of the type of women



who devote their whole lives to serving their near and dear ones. Such women make excellent nurses and managers of kindergartens.

Prokofyev had told me that Shatsky was completely recovered, but that the doctors did not yet allow him to participate in geological expeditions. Fatigue or excitement brought on his former delirious thoughts, and so he now occupied himself with theoretical problems. He had already written several interesting papers in this sphere.

I told Shatsky that I was interested in the problem of the Kara-Bugaz.

"We are living at a time," he said, "when we must learn to pose far-reaching problems. The Kara-Bugaz interests me too, but not in the same way it does you. It interests me as the most convenient place for experiments in harnessing new forms of energy. You of course know that Prokofyev is not so much a scientist as a poet. We must keep fantasy in check. A chemical works must be built on the Kara-Bugaz. But it cannot be built without a powerful source of energy. Prokofyev is looking for gases, and others are looking for coal and oil in the vicinity of the Kara-Bugaz. All this is very well, but they have forgotten about the chief thing—they have forgotten that the Kara-Bugaz itself is an inexhaustible source of new energy."

"What kind?"

"Solar. I know what the sun is. To conquer the sun we have to call on the method of homeopathy. The homeopaths use the deadliest of poisons, but in microscopic doses. The sun is beneficial only in small doses. Essentially it is lethal. Where there is too much of it it wreaks drastic devastation. It destroys huge expanses of the earth. The Transcaspian deserts are a classical example of this."

Krasnogorsky argued that the crux of the matter lay not in the sun but in the lack of water in those regions. Shatsky heard him out attentively.

"There is plenty of water there," he replied with a smile. "The trouble is that the water evaporates quicker than it accumulates. We are surrounded on all sides by arid lands. And the balance sheet is not in favour of man."



He looked at me through narrowed lids.

"We are all walking along the edge of a precipice without suspecting it. Do you know that during the last decade, according to the estimates of the great physicist Arrhenius, as much coal has been burned as during the entire existence of mankind? In a hundred or a hundred and fifty years from now the reserves of coal will give out. White coal can account for only sixty per cent of the world's demands for energy. You can hear the footsteps of impending disaster without straining your ears. You do not have to have a perfect ear for that. The exhaustion of power supplies will inevitably lead to a war among the capitalist countries. . . ."

"Shura!" his wife said sternly. "There won't be any war!"

"A war among the capitalist countries is inevitable," Shatsky repeated stubbornly.

"Shura," his wife said in a still sterner voice. "You know perfectly well there won't be any war."

"The capitalist world is searching for new sources of energy very slowly and clumsily. They are replacing gasoline with alcohol. They've conjured up the 'dry law' in America not to make the country stop drinking but to use all their alcohol as fuel. They're running their cars on Jamaica rum instead of gasoline."

"Do you mean to say that you as a scientist cannot see any way out?" I asked.

"And the sun?" Shatsky asked me in turn. "What about the sun! Each square centimetre of the earth's surface receives a hundred thousand calories annually from the sun. The plants take only seven-tenths of one per cent of this amount of solar energy. Some think that they can be made to take more and to yield fantastic harvests, but I believe that that's impossible. A surplus of energy would kill plants. Don't forget our homeopathic method. But in any case you can see what gigantic supplies of energy are being poured down on the earth all the time, and will keep pouring down for millions of years to come. Mankind has taken the line of least resistance. It is clutching at those kinds of energy whose supplies are insignificant, forgetting about the continuous sources which will last to the end of man's history."



"Interesting, isn't it?" Krasnogorsky whispered to me. I glimpsed a flash of justifiable pride in his eyes. They seemed to be saying: "See what remarkable men we have in our Daghestan!"

"Let us return to the Kara-Bugaz, however. We were saying that the sun's energy must be utilized. In this regard, a better place than the Kara-Bugaz could not be found in the U.S.S.R. The sunshine there is magnificent. If the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz were turned into a lake it would dry up in six years. In general, you have no idea how rapidly that entire region is drying up."

Shatsky gazed pensively out of the window. The sea was not visible, but one could see the grey-blue sea air that looked like a thick layer of steam.

"I intend to write a short scientific paper entitled 'Evaporation of the Earth.' Our attitude toward the sun is criminal. It annually supplies the earth with a hundred billion kilowatt-hours of energy, or a kilowatt per square metre."

"But solar energy machines do not seem to have yielded good results," Krasnogorsky put in.

"And they won't," retorted Shatsky. "Other ways must be found. We have chemistry, before whose possibilities the optical principle of capturing solar energy fades into the background. We must capture, concentrate and compress solar energy chemically. We must learn from the red seaweeds. They utilize twenty-four per cent of the solar energy that penetrates into the sea depths, whereas our land plants, immersed in oceans of sunlight, utilize only a paltry part of one per cent. Necessity is the mother of invention."

Shatsky paced up and down the room.

"It's stuffy, stuffy!" he muttered. "The evenings here give me asthma. The mountains become so hot during the day that they give off warmth all night long. How about going down to the sea?"

His wife willingly agreed to let him come with us. We strolled down to the beach. The stars were slumbering on the waves, now opening their white eyes wide, now shutting them tight. The Tiflis express rushed by near the fringe of foam on the shore. Its quick gay scream resounded over the sea; the train was in a hurry to shake off the flat plains



and plunge into the maze of mountains, valleys, rivers and vineyards that make up the soothing kaleidoscope of the Caucasus.

"There they are," Shatsky solemnly pointed to the sea, "the enormous water areas. They can be made to collect solar energy. The deserts will also be called upon to take part in this job. Obtaining solar energy chemically consists in utilizing the ability of solar energy to bring about chemical reactions. These reactions in turn produce electric power. In our laboratories we already have instruments—photoelectric cells—that turn the energy of the sun into electricity by means of chemical processes. We have been able to make photoelectric cells produce enough current under the sun's influence to operate a small motor. The Kara-Bugaz must be transformed into an all-Union laboratory for trapping the sun, and we must first of all utilize the captured solar energy to process the fabulous riches of the gulf."

When we returned, Shatsky's wife asked me in a low voice whether he had spoken any nonsense.

"You must not mention Kara-Ada in his presence," she said as we took our leave. "He seems to have forgotten about it, but the very name of Kara-Ada is enough to make him restive. I also happened to be there with him," she added, reddening.

## THE DESERT COMMANDER

"Your country is wonderful: one can walk for miles without coming across a single tree."

*Comment of an American traveller.*

I LEFT Makhach-Kala for Guryev, in the Emba oil fields, at night. My route lay through Astrakhan.

In the morning I hardly recognized the Caspian. It spread to the horizon like a vast lake of liquid grey clay. Jutting out of the water at its edge were what looked like dismal black lighthouses and belfries without crosses—these were the fishermen's villages on the flat islands of the Volga delta.



We were nearing the Twelve-Foot Roadstead, where a floating city—complete with hospital, post office, passenger docks, lighters and dredges that resembled the old monitors of the American Civil War days—rumbled and rocked on its anchors.

I saw Astrakhan, dotted with hundreds of sails, smelling of dry herring, and as dusty as the adobe towns of Asia.

On the rafts at the fisheries sunburned men and women, all covered with fish scales as with suits of mail, were spearing up spotted sturgeon and slapping them down onto the boards. Girls in blue slacks made an endless procession as they carried golden carp by their wet coral gills to the refrigerators.

From Astrakhan we crawled along for three whole days in a paddle-wheel steamer to Guryev, seeing nothing but a sky scorched by arid winds, the yellow sea, and fishing wherries riding at anchor.

There is not a single port between Astrakhan and Guryev, not a single haven. At a distance of sixty kilometres from the coast one can easily reach the sandy sea bottom with a pole. Thick growths of rushes with hard black knobs stretch far out to sea. From a distance they look like a narrow border painted in India ink against the pale horizon.

Both the route and the boat are known to perfection by the regular passengers. The route is as monotonous as the faded Asiatic sky. First the brown waters pouring in from the Volga, then, beyond the Belinskaya Shallows, the sea slowly begins to grow green, then Zaburunye, where ships pitch and toss in all weathers. Always on board are the same chubby captain, the same bearded helmsmen scanning the sea through ancient copper binoculars, and the same cook, an embittered widower who prepares flat-tasting cabbage soups and oversalted fish dishes.

At length you see cormorants, and seals dozing on their backs in the water, and everybody on board heaves a sigh of relief—the boat will soon be entering Guryev Roadstead. One can already visualize the deserts beyond it, overgrown with astragalus and pockmarked with crusts of salt.

And here is the roadstead. The boat threads its way between the chalk-white islands. It is easy to confuse the



latter with the continent-like clouds reflected in the quiet waters. They hang motionless over the desert, tinged a faint pink. One would think they were put there on purpose to mirror all the colours of eventide and the grandeur of the cobalt night.

The boat makes a rumbling sound as it sails into the Ural River—a narrow channel between tall rushes. Only toward midnight do we make out the shore lights of the Emba Oil town hanging in mid-air amid the dust. Opposite, on the right bank of the Ural, the windows of Guryev blink sleepily.

A smell of fish and burnt grass assails the nostrils. The boat rouses Guryev with a shrill wailing blast and comes to a rest against the deserted wharf.

In the morning the little Emba Oil town lay open to view across the Ural. It was as if a great flock of white birds had settled on the Asiatic bank, which is here called the Bokhara side. The houses seemed made of snow. The entire town—even the three-storey main office building—is built of compressed reeds covered with plaster and whitewashed.

Reeds are the best building material on the desolate shores of the Caspian Sea where there are no forests but reeds stretch for hundreds of kilometres. They would be the best material for the Kara-Bugaz development too. Adobe houses standing next to the reed cottages remind one of cavemen's fortresses. They are made of a mixture of clay and manure. Inside they smell of the stable, and are no easier to build in the arid desert than wooden houses, for the clay and manure mixture requires a great deal of water.

During my trip I came across one person only, an engineer named Cooper, who regretted the passing of the adobe huts. I made his acquaintance on the pontoon bridge over the Ural. He was watching a few urchins fishing for carp, and envy was written all over his face. When one of the boys, all atremble with excitement, pulled a gasping carp out of the muddy water, Cooper turned to me and said:

"Lucky kids! I wish I were a boy sitting out here in the baking sun with a fishing rod. It's a great pastime!"

I have Cooper to thank for introducing me to the man



who knows everything there is to know about the Emba district—that veteran of the desert, engineer Davydov.

Cooper ushered me into the engineer's office as one ushers the uninitiated into a hall of miracles. A tall lean man in white, looking very much like a captain of an ocean-going steamer, rose from behind the table.

He cast a stern glance at me and offered me a seat with a sweeping gesture. His white head seemed cast of metal. After asking and receiving permission to be present during their conversation, Cooper sat down respectfully to one side.

Davydov commenced to speak. His voice was rich and clear. Looking at him, I thought of Przhevalsky and Stanley, the old explorers of the Gobi and Sahara deserts; of the generals who had lost big armies in the desert sands, and of all the other romantic schoolboy associations connected with the desert—dromedaries, leather pails, simooms, and skeletons of horses lying by lone wells.

Davydov spoke in crisp sentences which he ended jerkily.

"What can the Kara-Bugaz give us and what can the Emba fields give it in return? Very well. We can give it oil, even though our oil is much too good to be used as fuel. Our southernmost regions—Kara-Chungul, Karaton and others—are relatively near the Kara-Bugaz and the Mangyshlak Peninsula.

"I hold that the entire eastern shore—Emba, Mangyshlak, the Kara-Bugaz, all the way up to Chikishliar—should be turned into a powerful industrial belt on the border of the desert. We will supply the oil; Mangyshlak—the coal and phosphorites; the Kara-Bugaz—mirabilite, sulphur, sulphuric acid, soda and other chemical products; Chikishliar—gas, and Cheleken—oil and ozocerite. Baku should work for the western areas, and we for the eastern areas.

"What else can we give the Kara-Bugaz? It was here, in the Emba fields, that the idea of building a railroad from Alexandrov Gai to Khiva originated. I have traversed the whole route with caravans and surveyed it. The project has been approved. It will be the first line to cut through the heart of the desert. It will breathe life into the riches now lying about like so much dead weight: the Kushum



meadow lands, Inder salt and potassium, Guryev fish, Emba oil deposits, the Aral Sea, and the Khiva oasis.

"The new line will play a tremendous role in developing the barren expanses of Ust-Urt, and thereby should also spur the development of the Kara-Bugaz to a considerable extent. There is no water in the desert through which the line will run. Diesel engines will operate on it.

"Thirdly and lastly. The Kara-Bugaz will produce soda. For the production of soda we will supply it with excellent lime from Rakusha. Rakusha is the Caspian wharf of the Emba oil fields. We will make Rakusha a port.

"We will build oil refineries. To operate them we will need sulphuric acid. The Kara-Bugaz will supply us with it, and we will be even. As you see, the Kara-Bugaz project affects the economic nerves of the entire coast from the Emba area to Atrek. It will become the industrial heart of the desert."

Davydov fell silent.

"Our dreams have come true," he murmured, turning to the window.

I studied his profile. It reminded me of the bronze faces of generals on old Roman coins. During one of my countless arguments with Prokofyev we had spoken of occupations that temper the will. Prokofyev claimed that explorers had the strongest wills. Davydov was a born explorer. His association with the desert told in the keenness of his glance and the quiet power of his voice. Whatever Davydov started he finished. Once he had resolved to lay out a garden in the salt wastes of Dossor. The idea struck even botanists as absolutely mad. People laughed at him, but Davydov paid no attention whatsoever to this.

For two years he fussed about with bushes that kept withering away in the corrosive soil. Then he freshened up the earth by skillful watering and draining, and now the workers of Dossor spend the evening hours strolling in their "own park." They can run their hands over the long-forgotten roughness of branches and inhale the fragrance of green leaves. The Dossorians are as proud of their first desert garden as, say, the Moscovites are of their Park of Culture and Rest.



After the survey report on the railroad from Alexandrov Gai to Khiva was approved in Moscow, Davydov applied for membership in the Party.

"I am convinced," he wrote, "that only the Party's policy can revive the desert, to the conquest of which I have devoted my whole life."

The silence lasted a long time. Davydov turned his eyes to me and said in a husky voice:

"I am not the only one who has devoted his whole life to the desert. But it has fallen to my lot to be a witness of and a participant in the conquest of these dead expanses. Only recently the Kara-Bugaz struck superstitious terror into the hearts of nomads and sailors. Even explorers did not dare to traverse its shores. How did the people of the cultured oases look upon it? As a gulf of death and poisonous water. As a hell. For centuries it lay untouched. For centuries it accumulated its riches. And now we are taking them away.

"We are finding ways and means of turning the most terrifying features of the desert into a source of life. I am speaking of the sun. The desert will be irrigated with its energy. There is a great law of physics. It says that energy is born only when there are varying temperatures. The sharp daily changes in temperature in the desert give rise to windstorms. The Kara-Bugaz is notorious as the most tempestuous spot on the Caspian Sea. As a matter of fact, a continuous storm rages there. Many call our Dossor oil field the Pole of Winds. The hurricanes of Dossor waste millions of horsepower for the sole purpose of raising gigantic clouds of dust. The wind is a tremendous source of power, but to this day we utilize it to an insignificant degree. Here, have a look at that."

Outside the window wind pumps were creaking and emitting deep grunts as they drew warm muddy water from the Ural river into *aryks*.

"The wind—we call it blue coal—is the best source of power for the desert. There are all the requisites here for constant steady winds. Even in windless years the desert manages to produce seventy per cent as much wind power as in the average windy year. Do you know what the annual



wind power is in Kazakhstan? Well, it's an interesting figure. Two hundred and thirty million horsepower. The wind accounts for ninety-six per cent of the power resources of Kazakhstan."

Cooper began to fidget in his chair. Davydov rose.

"You must not think that I'm letting my imagination run wild when I say that the winds of the desert should be used for transportation purposes too. I have not yet found an exact embodiment of this idea, but I can imagine vehicles with sails moving across the sands, where there is neither vegetation, villages, nor hills, and hence nothing to interfere with traffic. The sun, the wind and the sharp changes of temperature have given rise to the deserts. They too will destroy them. There is not the slightest doubt of this. Tomorrow Comrade Cooper will be going to our outlying workings at Makat. Go along with him, and I'm sure you will see many interesting things."

That evening I met Cooper at the tennis court. His opponent was serving, and Cooper was shouting the score in a guttural English. Kazakhs in broad pink calico trousers were sitting cross-legged around the court and shouting approval of every good stroke. Beyond the Ural River Guryev was sending up thick clouds of *kizyak* smoke. On our Bokhara side milky lights went up and the moon rose slowly over the desert. The higher it rose the paler it became, as though it were shedding a rich suntan.

On catching sight of me Cooper stopped playing and came over to me. While we were chatting a camel walked up to us. It stopped, gave us a supercilious glance and champed its purple lips. Cooper took me by the elbow and led me aside; we had been standing in the middle of the road. The camel hiccupped contemptuously and solemnly proceeded on its way. It was pulling a small cart in which a Kazakh woman lay sleeping with her infant, and a phonograph with a tin horn was blaring away.

We followed this sight with our eyes for a long time, dumbfounded. The camel turned off the road and pulled the cart straight into the desert.

"It's gone to graze in the steppe at Sokolok," Cooper explained with a sigh.



I had become accustomed to hearing engineers working in the wilds complain of their lot. No matter how cheerful an engineer is or how much he likes his work, he will never miss an opportunity of posing as a martyr suffering because there are no new books, or because the Moscow newspapers arrive two weeks late, or because there is no Borzhom mineral water in the co-operative shops.

But after he has unburdened himself, his spirits will soar again and he will launch into an eager description of the development. It is always the "best in the world," or "could easily be the best in the world" if Moscow had not gone and cut appropriations.

I prepared myself to hear complaints from Cooper, and I was not deceived.

The director of the trust called Cooper a "summer resident" and "handsome." When he was annoyed he would pound the table with his fist and shout that Emba Oil had no need for summer residents. Nobody ever paid attention to the director's threats. Everybody knew that when the matter was serious the director never shouted.

Cooper was thirty-five, but the director liked to call him "young man" because of his English appearance and the respect he showed for his elders.

"Before I arrived," Cooper complained, "everything down here was nice and quiet. But the moment I came it all began. They started sending survey parties a hundred kilometres into the desert. A hurricane flooded the Karaton workings. My chief was bitten by a phalanger and died, and I was appointed in his place. Then they sent one of those self-made directors from Baku—an awfully hotheaded fellow, the devil take him—and now, of all things, they want to build an industrial belt here. Not a centre, mind you, but a whole belt."

It was with this lover of silence that I drove down to Makat. We covered the hundred and forty kilometres by car in two hours. At first we passed through slightly rolling country, and then the steppe became as wide and even as some gigantic lake. The air was hazy and reminded one of watery glue. Brown whirlwinds swept across the road with a heavy swishing sound. Susliks scampered away from under



our car wheels like so many peas from the pod. The arid bitterness of the air made us unbearably thirsty.

At times the chauffeur drove right across patches of clay and the dried beds of salt lakes.

Cooper related that in the spring, during the rare rains, the whole desert turns into a slough of slime. Then a car can make no headway no matter how hard the driver tries.

I had nothing for it but to listen to Cooper's chatter. First he told me about the project of a French scientist to flood the Sahara with the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, and suggested that I ask Davydov about it.

Then he delivered a speech in defence of the adobe buildings.

"Each country should differ sharply from all the others," he said. "A decree ought to be issued forbidding the destruction of original buildings and local sights as long as they are not contrary to the Soviet system. A variety of impressions makes for a fuller life, and a full life makes for good spirits and uplift. Therefore we ought to retain the cubic Eastern buildings, their colour and layout, keep the *aryks* in the streets, and build a factory to make Eastern tiles."

Cooper went so far as to say that one of our ancient Russian towns, Uglich for example, should be turned into a model of antiquity. He wanted to plant daisies and hemlock in the streets, populate the town with sweet little old ladies, hand it over to the Intourist Travel Agency and organize mass excursions of foreigners to visit it.

He chattered all the way to Makat. A violent whirlwind whipped white tongues of dust into the air around us. Through a film of dust plodded a caravan of camels carrying water from Dossor. Delivering water to Makat cost half a million rubles annually.

A dwarfed forest of black derricks stood over a shallow lake. The grey heat scorched one to the bone. Deep pumps spurted foamy oil out of the wells. Here ended the river, or sea, of oil whose source Prokofyev had discovered.

From Makat we drove on to Dossor, and from there we returned to Guryev in a motor-operated car over a narrow-gauge line.



A rosy mist hung over the desert. At the sidings we were plunged into silence. From time to time the calling of susliks could be heard.

The night fell all at once and covered the desert with a huge cap of stars. A river of foggy electric light poured out in front of our car. The smell of wormwood and the freshness of the night floated in through the wide windows. I turned to Cooper.

"You spoke of the originality of the East. What can be more original than this motor-driven railroad car in the heart of the nocturnal desert?"

"I understand you," Cooper said significantly. "You are getting Davydov's illness. It is called the 'desert disease.'"

I no longer doubted that Cooper was a typical "summer resident" in our unusual era.

"When was this railroad built?"

"In 1927. Davydov built it."

When I left Guryev I carried away with me the image of Davydov, the grey-haired desert commander, sowing the salt wastes to the first crops of Socialist industry, and that of the "summer resident" Cooper.

## MOUNTAINS OF PINK CHALK

MANGYSHLAK was the last point in the itinerary Prokofyev had drawn up for me. It terminated my circuitous journey around the gulf and completed my study of the districts indivisibly linked with the Kara-Bugaz.

Only after visiting this peninsula would I have the right, according to Prokofyev, to enter the Kara-Bugaz.

My journey to Mangyshlak can be called a journey to the land of stars.

In Fort Alexandrovsk I made the acquaintance of Vasilyev. A member of the Communist Party, he was preparing, like Davydov, to shatter the desert bogey and turn the wastes into an aid of Socialist industry. He had studied the data on the few desert expeditions (Andrusov's, Natsky's and Bayarunas') and was drawing up exact and concise plans



for the initial development of the riches discovered by these geologists. He planned new roads to the Kara-Tau Mountains, where the white-hot air hovers like a broad protective belt over deposits of anthracite, oil, phosphorites, copper and manganese.

In his free time he loved to peruse the journal *Mirovedeniye* (*Study of the Cosmos*), where the vast life of the firmament that passes unnoticed by us was traced from month to month: the appearance of new stars, the fall of meteors, hypotheses regarding new solar systems, and the study of cosmic rays.

I think it must have been the Mangyshlak sky that led Vasilyev to interest himself in astronomy. Nowhere have I seen star showers so grand or the planets so dazzling. The planets were so brilliant that they seemed to be flying towards us from infinity, all heading for one and the same point on the globe—the dead Mangyshlak Peninsula. But afterward we laughed at ourselves. They were just as far away as always; yet to this day I retain my Mangyshlak impression of a rapidly falling sky.

My inspection of the peninsula took a short time—only six days. I travelled with Vasilyev. We saw sandy seas hemmed in at the horizon by perpendicular pink and white mountainous coasts. These mountains rose in a solid mass, and their tops were as flat as the deserts at their feet.

We saw coal seams lying right on the surface. Up until 1914 this coal had been mined by the Caucasus and Mercury Steamship Company, which later dropped work here because the transportation costs ran too high. The deposits stretch for a hundred and fifty kilometres, and reserves are calculated roughly at three hundred million tons, an obvious underestimation. The entire coal region is rich in fresh springs. At Tyubejik we saw sands baked by petrified oil. The sands give off the same smell as Moscow's modern asphalted streets.

I told Vasilyev about Prokofyev's theory. In my opinion the Mangyshlak oil affords brilliant corroboration of the theory, the more so that, according to Vasilyev, it rises here to the surface from untapped depths.



Vasilyev made no reply. This taciturn and very precise native of Cherny Yar on the Volga avoided hasty conclusions and premature generalizations.

"Perhaps," he said. "But now I am more interested in phosphorites."

The deposits of phosphorites lay at the foot of the mountains of pink chalk. Seen from afar, these mountains, pitted by deep gullies, looked like the human brain. One of the explorers of Mangyshlak told me that if the creases were straightened out, the mountains would occupy an area two hundred times larger. The mountains rose like pink cupolas and seemed very light, as though made of giant sponges. In the sand at their base lay boulders and rocks the shape of cones and flat cakes. Vasilyev kicked one of the boulders.

"This is phosphorite."

Some of the boulders were more than a metre in diameter, and we were able to hide from the sun in their shade.

It was going on for three o'clock in the afternoon, the worst time of the day, when the heat was as thick as syrup. We decided to seek shelter in a valley where Vasilyev said there would be an oasis.

I gave a snort. I could just see that miserable well with its two bucketfuls of water and a few prickly bushes around it. What sort of oasis could there be under this sweltering sky?!

We rode over a sea of phosphorites, through a gorge, ascended the ridge, and there, deep beneath us, lay a valley covered with squares of heavy millet. The little fields were bordered with green plane trees, and limpid streams sparkled on the floor of the valley. A cube-shaped white adobe house stood in the shade of the plane trees.

Vasilyev glanced at me from out of the corner of his eye. Our horses, sensing the proximity of water, neighed, irked by their slow riders. I looked over my shoulder. The desert was stalking this bit of rich, green earth. From where I was the desert seemed like the skin of a huge fallen camel. The withered bushes stuck out like tufts of unbleached wool. Close to the earth the air shone like glycerin.

As we rode downhill we again encountered large fields of phosphorites.



"Here is your raw material for the Kara-Bugaz." Vasilyev stopped by a boulder which had cracked into two pieces of exactly equal size. Crystals glistened on their inner surfaces, stretching in narrow rays from the centre to the edge.

"The Kara-Bugaz works will manufacture sulphuric acid. If you process phosphorite with this acid you will get excellent superphosphate. We will build a road to the sea and ship the phosphorite off to the Kara-Bugaz. In Central Asia the superphosphate mixed with cotton cake will go to fertilize the cotton plantations. The mixture is called *pakhtanuri*."

Vasilyev told me about the Taur-Kyr Mountains and the tempestuous spring flood waters in the gullies of Karyn-Yaryk. The Taur-Kyr Mountains lie near the eastern shore of the Kara-Bugaz, south of Cape Kulan-Gurlan. Only one man—the geologist Lupov—has been there. He found deposits of coal over an area of 1,600 square kilometres, beds of phosphorite and many small fresh water springs.

Geologist Bayarunas wanted to get to the Taur-Kyr from the north, from Mangyshlak, but the labourers refused to go up into those unexplored hills with him.

The Taur-Kyr coal deposits are the closest to the Kara-Bugaz mirabilite workings, but so far they have not been explored.

Karyn-Yaryk is a gigantic hollow stretching from the Kara-Tau Mountains to the Kara-Bugaz. By rights the spring waters of these mountains should run through the hollow and fall into the gulf, but some of the water becomes stranded and forms impassable salt marshes, while the rest settles in the countless craters in the ground.

These spring waters form extraordinarily large and swift streams. Judging by the traces they leave, they are sometimes one hundred and fifty metres wide and two metre deep. The porous earth imbibes them, salts them or invests them with laxative properties, and then casts them out on the surface in the form of small springs. Nobody has ever yet ventured into the heart of Karyn-Yaryk Hollow.

We rode up to an adobe house and greeted the wife of a young Kazakh—a slim, agile woman who wore silver-



embroidered leather slippers over her high boots—and her old father. The latter put me in mind of the portraits of old English sailors with sparse beards bristling on either side of their chins.

“*Khabar bar?*” the old man asked.

We drank some delicious cold water and did what was required of the guest—told them the city news.

We spent that night with the Kazakhs. All night long the desert kept me awake. The stars were like fragments of ice thawing in the black sky, and their light drizzled down to earth in a misty sheen. The great rivers of the Milky Way merged with night sands of Karyn-Yaryk, spreading southward to the Kara-Bugaz.

The water whispered drowsily in the *aryk*. Vasilyev, tormented by fleas, told me that the distance from our sun to the sun of the nearest solar system—the star Alpha Centauri—is two hundred fifty thousand times greater than the distance between the earth and the sun.

This was interesting, but I kept dozing off. From time to time I gave a start and woke up. I dreamed that it was not the water in the *aryk* that was gurgling but the starlight travelling trillions of years to reach the earth. I dreamed that the Milky Way had fallen into the Caspian Sea. The *Chicherin* was plying the Milky Way and through the transparent bottom of the ship I could see thousands of fishes and medusae streaming to the sea bottom. Prokofyev had told me that the fish settled in cramped layers which thousands of years later turned into oil.

I finally awoke at dawn. A pale blue haze was pouring out of the east. The stars had grown yellow and looked like fruit withering at the approach of the sun. I went out and drank in the air as one drinks water.

The horses looked at me and whinnied softly. That was their way of greeting me and begging me not to leave too soon.

On our way back, the dazzling chalk plateau of Udyuk spread before us like a petrified white sea. As we slowly neared the chalky slopes we drew out our black driving goggles. The sun there was sheer torture.



## DATA FOR A HISTORY OF THE GULF

LIEUTENANT Zherebtsov skirted the shores of the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz in 1847.

Old Russia evinced no interest in her riches. Only in 1897 did the Ministry of Commerce and Industry bestir itself and dispatch an expedition, headed by the hydrologist Shpindler, to the Kara-Bugaz.

This expedition definitely established that the gulf is the world's largest source of Glauber's salt.

Then began a kaleidoscopic period in the history of the gulf, reminiscent of a short story by O. Henry. This history is not recorded anywhere. It has to be pieced together on the basis of articles written by geologists, stories told by sailors and Turkmenian felucca boatmen, reports made by heads of expeditions, forgotten projects, ships' logs and other scant and contradictory sources.

The Kara-Bugaz became the arena of feverish activity.

At the end of the nineteenth century a world geological congress was held in St. Petersburg. Here geologists first learned of the riches of the Kara-Bugaz.

Then, as now, the whole of Europe and America used artificial sulphate (as dehydrated mirabilite is called). Thousands of plants had been set up to produce it. No wonder the information about the Kara-Bugaz came like a bombshell to the sulphate industrialists. A project for building a chemical works of world-wide importance on Cheleken Island to process the Kara-Bugaz sulphate was immediately drawn up. French, English and Belgian capitalists assumed control of the project.

The tsarist government balked, however, and for some reason or other refused to grant a concession on the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz and Cheleken Island.

The haggling went on for three years but nothing came of it.

In 1909 the businesswoman Knyazeva sent an expedition of her own to the Kara-Bugaz. The wealth of Zachary Dubsky, the absolute owner of Mangyshlak, gave this envious woman no peace.



Naturally enough, kindhearted engineers were not long in appearing, who were quite willing for a decent sum to "join" the Kara-Bugaz to Knyazeva's property and obtain a title in her name to almost the entire western and southwestern shore of the gulf.

But Knyazeva was too late. The cigarette-paper manufacturer Katyk and the Aivaz Company had already seized the best sections of the shore, where the tide threw up the greatest quantity of mirabilite. They received tidy sums from the bank to launch processing of the natural resources of the gulf, but they used this money for stock exchange manipulations. The few tons of mirabilite they extracted for appearance's sake lay hardening on the shore till 1929.

All that remains of Knyazeva's expedition to the Kara-Bugaz are a few green rowboats, buried under sand and corroded by salt.

The head of this expedition had searched in Baku for steamers with a shallow draft for use in the gulf. There were only two such vessels. One belonged to the unsavoury Manchuria Ship Company, and the other to the no less shady Ashurov Bros. The Manchuria Company and the Ashurovs decided to pick Knyazeva clean and set a fantastic price for the charter of their steamers. The expedition had nothing for it but to navigate the gulf in Turkmenian boats, hiring as pilot an experienced Kazan Tatar by the name of Gubayev.

The members of Knyazeva's expedition—all students—crossed the gulf by boat in several directions. They choked on shores where hydrogen sulphide fumes were thick, they waded across shallow coves where the water was ankle-deep for several kilometres, but they found no mirabilite. It was a hot summer and all the mirabilite had dissolved in the warm water.

The expedition undertaken for the glorification of Knyazeva did establish, however, that mirabilite abundantly precipitates in the winter, when any object submerged in the gulf becomes coated with crystals of mirabilite. The expedition proposed what it considered to be the most perfect method of extracting mirabilite from the gulf bottom—scooping it up in ordinary sacks—and then put up title posts around Knyazeva's property and left.



In the journals of this expedition we find the first mention of coal deposits located at the base of the Taur-Kyr Mountains, fifty kilometres from the eastern shore of the gulf. The members of the expedition had wanted to prospect the deposits, but not a single native was willing to go with them into the hills in the heat of summer.

Soon the war began, and the Kara-Bugaz was forgotten. Once in a while in winter nomads came up to its leaden, stormy expanses. But they continued on their way to Krasnovodsk without stopping for long on these gloomy shores.

The gulf raged away in solitude. It was rumoured about in the Turkmenian winter camps that even the Russians and the English had been repelled by the gulf's accursed waters and were not able to extract anything useful from them.

In 1920, Lenin learned about the Kara-Bugaz and comprehensively posed the question of utilizing its wealth. Forty thousand gold rubles were allotted to outfit an expedition to determine how to extract mirabilite and then to begin extraction at once.

A geologist named Podkopayev headed the expedition. Its scientific results were immense, but it afforded little practical results—an inexperienced engineer had recruited workers with large families in Astrakhan and brought them to the desert shores of the Kara-Bugaz. The food supplies were insufficient and ran out before the actual work began. The workers left their jobs and dispersed.

The scientific section of Podkopayev's expedition worked in the gulf three years. It arrived there on the s.s. *Nizhni Novgorod*, escorted by two navy launches, the *Shaumyan* and the *Pereboina*.

Podkopayev established that mirabilite starts crystallizing in the middle of November and stops about the middle of March, when the reverse process, dissolving, begins. Hence he called mirabilite a "periodic mineral."

Besides mirabilite, much magnesium chloride and sodium chloride was found in the Kara-Bugaz.

Podkopayev estimated that six thousand million tons of mirabilite settle annually in the gulf. The deposits were recognized to be the largest in the world.



Podkopayev had found it very difficult to get through to the Kara-Bugaz. A capricious sand bar obstructed the entire width of the strait. During storms big waves formed at the bar, whereas in calm weather one could see the waters rushing over it into the gulf. Here the blue water of the sea gave way suddenly to water of a leaden hue.

In 1923, a group of workers headed by a student in a shabby jacket appeared on Cape Kurguzull, which is Kazakh for "lopsided girl."

The group had been sent by the Daghestan Lights Glassworks. The glassworks were short of sulphate, while huge deposits of it lay almost next door, in the Kara-Bugaz.

On Cape Bek-Tash the glassworks built a wharf and a stone house.

From Kurguzull the sulphate was delivered to the wharf by camel and in Turkmenian boats, and there it was transferred to steamers.

Nineteen twenty-three can be considered the year in which exploitation of the riches of the Kara-Bugaz was first begun. The student in the shabby jacket moved into the new stone building on Bek-Tash. He has remained on the Kara-Bugaz to the present day. Now he is the Secretary of the District Committee of the Party and is considered one of the leading specialists on all questions related to the gulf.

Sulphate is dry Glauber's salt, and it is so white that in summer one cannot look at it in the strong sunlight without risking one's eyesight. Mirabilite is the same Glauber's salt, but only saturated with water. Mirabilite contains ten parts of water and one part of Glauber's salt. What industry needs is sulphate. There is no reason why mirabilite should be shipped. That would be tantamount to loading the holds of vessels with water.

Therefore, mirabilite is dried, or, as the chemists put it, dehydrated. The hot climate of the Kara-Bugaz and the steady dry winds are great aids in drying the salt.

Mirabilite is spread out in low flat heaps, and in two days a layer of very fine dry sulphate forms on top. The sulphate may be removed boldly, without fear of mixing it with mirabilite, for a hard crust forms between the two.



The crust is then broken up, after which the mirabilite is left to dry again and produce a new layer of sulphate.

This drying process takes a long time and depends wholly on the whims of the Kara-Bugaz. If a wind blows up, clouds of sulphate are swept into the desert, veiling everything around with a glittering film of bitter powder.

In the autumn of 1926, a government commission arrived at the gulf. It found more than a hundred and fifty thousand tons of sulphate on the shore. Soon after, a trust for the exploitation of the wealth of the gulf, the Kara-Bugaz Sulphate Trust, was founded, and the first period in the life of the gulf became past history.

The trust arrived as the sovereign owner of the gulf. It included the Kara-Bugaz in the general plan for the industrialization of the eastern borderlands of the U.S.S.R., into the bold plan for conquering the deserts.

## BEKMET, THE OLD LIAR

"You were fading, Khorezm, but now  
you are blossoming!"

*From a contemporary  
Turkmenian song.*

BARIL was in despair. There could be no talk of enlightening the Turkmenian labourers as long as old Bekmet lived at the northern section of the Kara-Bugaz Sulphate Trust. Once again he had contrived to break up her little anti-religious lecture.

In the evening the dust-covered Turkmenians gathered outside their tents. The campfires were burning. A wind was blowing down over the gulf. The white smoke of the wormwood fires hung over the water like a stratus cloud.

Vague, milky stars blinked through the smoke, and the heavy surf, tired of tossing up sticky foam, rippled softly over the sandy beach.

Khakim, the only dog in the place, ran up and down the shore for a long time, howling himself hoarse at the south, where the moon was rising under a dusky halo. There



were two things Khakim hated: the moon and the steam launch which frequently visited them from the strait, where the trust had its offices. Khakim would crouch on the wharf and growl at the launch every time it pitched on a wave and shook the wooden platform.

That evening everybody had assembled to hear the talk; even Murad, the former Hassan-Kuli mailman had come.

Murad had rheumatism, a very rare complaint in the desert. It had made him famous and surrounded him with an aureole of exceptionality, as always happens to people taken with mysterious diseases. Rheumatism in a Turkmenian is as unusual as *pendinka* or *reshta* in a European.

I remember standing a whole hour in a corner of the dusty market place in Krasnovodsk watching a *reshta*—a terribly long worm as thin as a hair—being pulled out of the leg of a giant Turkmenian. Korchagin stood next to me openmouthed in admiration. Back home in Kostroma he had never imagined the existence of such a disease.

The worm was carefully wound round a match. When it began to hold back, the match with the worm was bound to the patient's leg, after which the surgeon would slap the man's dusty brown back and let him go off for a day. The entire treatment consisted in hooking the head of the worm to a match and then cautiously pulling it out for a week. If the worm broke, the treatment was fruitless.

Murad's illness had just about the same effect on the Turkmenians. They would squat round him and make him bend and unbend his knee. When his kneecap snapped, those in front would recoil and fall on those in back, clamping their lips in fright. Bekmet advised Murad to let a cup of blood out from under his tongue, and if Baril had not interfered angrily, Bekmet would have bled the former mailman with his jagged razor.

Murad's affliction interested Baril to such an extent that she wrote an article about it for the local newspaper. She demanded that urgent measures be taken to avoid a repetition of such a case.

When Khorobrykh, who had been appointed manager of the Kara-Bugaz northern section after completing the



highway from Krasnovodsk to the gulf, read the article, he told Baril:

"If we want to cure the Hassan-Kuli mailman of rheumatism, we ought to include excavation work in Hassan-Kuli to the sum of fifteen-hundred thousand rubles in our plan for next year. That's the sort of thing that comes of a small newspaper article."

"Oh, these engineers!" Baril exclaimed. "These engineers who think everybody but themselves is an utter idiot!"

Murad's case was very simple. He had been a mailman in Hassan-Kuli. The mail boat anchored about twelve kilometres off the shore because of the shallows. To get to it he had to ride a kilometre and a half out to sea on a bullock cart and then transfer to a *kulaz*, a flat-bottomed rowboat.

Murad made this trip four times a month. Nobody knew, nor could anybody know, for that matter, when the ship would come in or how late it would be. So Murad would drop anchor in the roadstead, pull out his modest lunch, and eat it.

Evening would come, then night, and still there would be no sign of the boat.

Murad would then stretch out on the bottom of his *kulaz* and sleep until the shrill blast of the boat roused him.

After Murad had received his mail, he would row back to the shore, but the lazy bullock cart driver would be gone—he never waited for the ship to come in. So Murad would hoist the leather mailbags on his back and wade the kilometre and a half to the shore with the water up to his knees. It was easier for the passengers: the boat stayed in Hassan-Kuli until morning and they spent the night on board.

For twenty years Murad had wandered across the night sea with his mail, both summer and winter, when the icy water cramped his feet.

Once he had dropped his bag in the water, soaking part of the letters.

Among those who attended the anti-religious lecture on the evening in question were young Guzar, Prokofyev's companion, who was now a tunnel brigade leader, and a worm-breeder from Firuza whose name nobody knew. The



latter used to breed silkworms. There came a time, however, when he found himself short of mulberry leaves, the chief raw material in his painstaking industry, and then his old wife died, so he set out to wander over Turkmenia, spreading his poor man's wisdom.

Bekmet, of course, sat in the front row. He nodded cheerfully to Baril, chattered a great deal and nudged his neighbours as he made himself more comfortable. His face was a picture of bliss. He could hardly wait to hear what Baril would say. "The old hypocrite," Baril thought as she began her lecture.

Guzar, who knew Russian well, interpreted for her. A subtle approach was needed here. Baril did not say that there was no Allah, but explained to her audience in simple and concise words the actual meaning of such miracles as thunder, lightning, the automobile and the steamship. The Turkmenians listened openmouthed.

Baril could not help thinking with a smile that she was facing not so much a gathering of labourers as a kindergarten. And truly enough, these brave sunburned men who knew each little mark and hillock in the desert guffawed with pleasure and slapped one another on their hats, raising clouds of stifling dust.

They hid their slim brown hands, which could send a rifle bullet into the bull's eye at half a kilometre, in the sleeves of their tattered coats.

Baril had not yet finished when Bekmet suddenly intervened.

"The automobile, that devil's bullock cart, was made by man, may he be glorified, but what man did not make is the laughing tree, which is called *kassak*. Such a tree could be made only by Allah."

The men turned to Bekmet and their eyes lit up.

Bekmet launched into one of his stories.

"This happened in the aul of Varun-Kala," he said, paying no heed to Baril's frown of annoyance. "You listen too. This actually took place and I was a witness to it. I stopped in that aul on my way to Mecca. And I was going to Mecca because I'm no worse than those dervishes who lick their holiness off the Prophet's coffin together with



the dust. In those days tsarist officials still rode about the auls, and Shah Seiid-Asfendiar resided in our Khiva.

"The Russian officials went about collecting money. You gave them five rubles a year, and in twenty years you could sail to Medina, and there join the crowd of True Believers making the pilgrimage to Mecca. The boat waited for you; it would not leave until it had gathered as many passengers as there are sheep in a crowded pen. I gave five rubles a year too, for I wanted to be a holy man, a hadji, and wear a green turban on my foolish head.

"And so I received my papers and a boat ticket, and on the way to Ashkhabad I stopped for the night in the aul of Varun-Kala, at the house of a redheaded man by the name of Khushet. All evening I told him about Mecca and Yemen, where coffee blossoms, and in the hills tall palms rustle their leaves. The heart of a True Believer cannot withstand such temptations. Khushet was green with envy all evening. Then another guest rode up in a new bullock cart drawn by a fine horse to spend the night in Khushet's house.

"Before going to bed, Khushet said: 'I shall think it over. Perhaps I shall come with you to Mecca and see the evening star shining over the black rock of the Prophet.' 'You will be doing a fine deed,' I said, and went to sleep.

"I awoke at night to hear someone walking past my bed.

"'Who is there?' I asked.

"'Sleep,' replied Khushet. 'I am looking for a fire to light my narghile.'

"In the morning he greeted me cheerfully and said that he was going to Mecca too, and that he would catch up with me in Krasnovodsk. He was as good as his word. From Krasnovodsk we travelled together along the great route, praying and hardly partaking of food.

"Ai, what didn't we see! We saw cities where there were as many people as there are grains of sand in the desert. We saw Istanbul, and we sailed many seas.

"In Mecca we slept in a caravanserai with pilgrims from Baluchistan, India and Tripoli. I did not sleep a single night, listening to the noise of the crowd, the chanting of those in prayer and the bellowing of hundreds of camels.



"Five times I had the joy of kissing the black rock of the Prophet.

"On the third night a man from Oman came to our caravanserai with a sack of dry branches with shrivelled little berries.

"He called out to everyone that he was selling branches of the laughing *kassak* tree to fill the hearts of the pilgrims with joy before Allah.

"We bought the berries of this branch, and we each swallowed four seeds. Right away we felt tremendously happy, as though we had just drunk Russian vodka. We laughed and danced and told indecent stories. Only toward morning did we fall asleep, and one of the tramps—curse him and his whole black kin!—stole my slippers and bag of bread and olives from under Khushet's head.

"We returned home. On the way back I blessed Khushet, who had not spared his last coppers to visit the Prophet's grave.

"But no sooner had we entered the aul of Varun-Kala than the police came and arrested Khushet, and took him away to Ashkhabad. I was dumbfounded. I could not understand why a man bearing the name of hadji, who had cleansed himself of his past sins with fasting and prayer, should be treated in such a rough and undignified manner.

"And what do you think I learned that day? It turned out that a month after we left, Khushet's wife, a quiet, modest woman, told the authorities that Khushet had killed the guest who arrived that night on the fine horse. He had buried him outside the aul, sold the horse and cart in Ashkhabad, and with this money had made his pilgrimage to the grave of the Prophet. So you see to what lengths a man can go out of veneration and faith!"

With this Bekmet finished his tale, and no one could tell whether he was in earnest or joking. Baril glanced at him searchingly. The old man was not as simple as she had thought. She rose from her place at the fire and went to the crowded frame house where Khorobrykh had fixed up a corner for her behind a sackcloth curtain. Guzar walked by her side, chuckling: the old man certainly did tell interesting stories!



"He's a gay old fellow, a gay old fellow indeed!" he kept reiterating. "He could help you a lot."

"A fat lot he can help me!" Baril thought bitterly. "The devil take him and his help!"

Guzar had learned to read Turkmenian and Russian, and had been begging Baril to open a school for Turkmenians at the works. Everybody would attend the school.

Now the question of the school was settled. All they had to do was to invite a teacher from Ashkhabad.

Khorobrykh and his assistant Kazansky, a fair-headed technician who had become so sunburned that the parting in his hair seemed like a blood-red scar, both preferred to sleep in the open. The house was infested with phalangers and scorpions. There were less of them on the shore—those vermin could not stand the sulphate.

Khorobrykh and Kazansky spread their capes over the flat piles of sulphate and slept peacefully, providing a storm, or the dull cannonade of the surf, or a salt simoom, did not wake them. In such cases the camels would turn their hind quarters to the wind and bellow.

Khorobrykh and Kazansky would jump up cursing, their eyes smarting from the acrid dust, and hide in the house.

Baril also slept on the sulphate. At night it flickered like blue tongues of flame. Her sulphate couch shone like the crystal bed in that fairy tale read so long ago and completely forgotten.

"We must make Murad bathe in the gulf no less than ten times," Khorobrykh said in his thick voice, puffing on his pipe. "Then nothing will remain of his rheumatism but its fame in the nomad camps. Comrade Baril, you'd better do something about it before they make a holy Turkmenian out of him; that would be a bit awkward, wouldn't it?"

"I'm tired of your jokes," Baril responded good-naturedly. "I'll cure him just for spite. I made up my mind about it long ago."

Khorobrykh could not fall asleep for a long time. The following day they had to begin digging the tunnel. There



were not enough workers, and the few they had were afraid to drive their picks into the marl.

An old Turkmenian whom Khorobrykh had dubbed "King Menelaus" was spreading the rumour that a wicked spirit lived in the marl and would cruelly punish everybody who dared to pierce the heart of the hill.

Khorobrykh decided to send Guzar off to the neighbouring camps early in the morning to call the men out to work on the tunnel. He promised Guzar ten rubles for every recruited kibitka.

The Kara-Bugaz Sulphate Trust intended to follow up the Makhach-Kala experiment and commence basinization of sulphate at its northern section.

For this a dried-up lake named Lake No. 6 (engineers in all latitudes have a passion for numbers) was chosen.

Khorobrykh had to dig a canal linking the gulf with the lake, and a 130-metre tunnel through a small hill. Then a three-metre layer of Kara-Bugaz water would be pumped over the canal into the lake in the autumn.

Three metres of water were to give a sediment of fifty centimetres of mirabilite over an area of one square kilometre. The sultry winds and the blazing sun were to turn the top layer of mirabilite in Lake No. 6 daily into a film of sulphate three centimetres thick.

The sulphate lies evenly in lakes; its surface is as flat as a table, and therefore it can be scooped up by machinery. The trust had ordered twenty-four scoopers and was pressing Khorobrykh to finish the work at the earliest possible date.

The canal was completed before the appointed time, even though at first Kazansky shouted himself hoarse and spat himself dry trying to teach yesterday's nomads how to hold a spade. They all held it off at arm's length, back to front, and it was a piteous sight to see them sweating away and struggling with that contraption of the devil. Presently they got the hang of it, however, and the work began to hum.

The canal stretched as far as the hill. In the morning "Menelaus" had come up to Khorobrykh and mumbled that the workers, being True Believers, were refusing to



destroy the hill, for Allah would cover the whole steppe with a black crust, and the genii of the hills would sweep the kibitkas and people into the water and drown them there, camels, belongings and all.

"My dear old man," Khorobrykh said in a thundering voice, "gather all the honourable men in your tent. I shall come and talk to you about the genii of the hills. They say you know a word against leprosy, whereas I know a word against the genii of the hills. Allah has given to each according to his need: to a lizard its tail, to a mule its ears, and to a clever man the word that will save him from disaster."

"Menelaus" left. Baril was sure that Khorobrykh's "tricks" would get him nowhere. Kazansky suggested that they do without the workers and blow the hill up with dynamite. Khorobrykh only laughed.

"After the very first explosion they'll fold up their tents and flee to the desert, and you'll never get them to come back, even if you drag a whole bargeful of Narzan mineral water over to tempt them with. You have to know how to approach them. I'm a Central Asian. You can depend on me."

Khorobrykh ordered some green tea to be delivered to "Menelaus." Without this sour, medicine-like drink, no serious business could be contracted. The tea cleared the brain and did away with all fears.

Next day, however, something happened that nearly upset all his plans. Murad had taken Baril's advice and gone bathing in the gulf. And now he lay in his tent emitting piercing shrieks. His body was burning unbearably from the caustic water of the Kara-Bugaz.

The Turkmenians were alarmed. Bekmet was already standing over the dying man with his jagged razor, ready to let his bad blood, when Baril came running up.

"Away with you!" she cried with such an air of command that Bekmet dropped his razor and his eyes began to roll with fear. "Away, you good-for-nothing! What do you mean by cutting up a live man?"

She lifted Murad's foot in its calico trouser-leg on which purple peonies blossomed over a pink ground, and bent it at the knee several times. The Turkmenians staggered



back and held their breath. They expected to hear a thunderous snap, but there was not a sound. The silence was so deep that they could hear a camel champing some five score paces away.

Murad stopped groaning.

"Well?" Baril said triumphantly. "Bring him a bucket of spring water and let him wash himself."

The Turkmenians' faces registered horror. Here was the law of the desert, permitting only the face, hands and feet to be washed, being shattered by this woman with the glass machine on her nose.

No one save Murad's old woman so much as moved. She brought in the bucket of water. Everybody left the tent and listened in trepidation as Murad, groaning and calling on the Prophet, splashed about over an iron cauldron.

Soon he emerged, fresh and pale from his first wash. Solemnly he walked over to Baril and bowed to the waist before her with his hands pressed to his breast. He felt like a young man who has just stolen his first bride.

"Khorobrykh," Baril laughed, turning to the engineer, who was getting ready to go to the council of elders. "Today the October Revolution has begun at our works. The important thing is to get the nomads started. Once that's done, everything will run as smooth as silk."

"I told you so," replied Khorobrykh.

As much as she tried, Baril could not remember Khorobrykh ever telling her anything of the kind.

"You'll see, the Turkmenian women will soon be going to the strait to have their children. A lying-in hospital has already been opened out there. Do you know, a Turkmenian longshoreman at Kara-Bugaz Port sold his tent and built a house out of plywood boxes. That is no less significant than Murad's bath."

The council of elders lasted two hours. First they drank green tea and spoke of the poor stand of grass in the Ada steppes, and about the sand completely burying the old caravan routes to Kungrad. Khorobrykh did not take part in the talk, but listened anxiously. Outside he thought he heard a strange noise. It sounded as if the Turkmenians were folding up their kibitkas.



Then Khorobrykh spoke about tunnels and compared them to the most innocent of wells in the hills. He appealed to the famed bravery of the Turkmenians, dwelt at length on the splendid transparent stone called glass that would be made out of sulphate and spoke of the flour which would be obtained for fertilizing the cotton plantations.

Taibazar, a Turkmenian, was first to rise.

"I will go. Give me an iron stick."

Niyazov, a Kazakh, got up next.

"But what about the charm?" Bekmet cried out in disappointment.

To calm him, Khorobrykh declaimed the opening lines of the first poem that came to his mind.

*Say, uncle, 'twas no matter trifling  
That Moscow mid the smoke fumes stifling,  
Was yielded to the French?\**

The old men stroked their beards and nodded their sheepskin hats.

Khorobrykh went out and emitted a string of oaths. Baril was sure that Khorobrykh had gone too far and was acting like a madman. Khorobrykh shrugged his shoulders.

"Nonsense! Why do you guard the old fools against innocent jokes?"

These Asiatic ways of doing things annoyed Baril, but soon she stopped remonstrating: the dull thud of picks resounded at the base of the hill.

"We will crush the desert like a phalanger," Khorobrykh muttered as he went off to the hill.

It was the beginning of August, and the days were blazing with an unbearable heat. The heat poured down in broad salt-white rivers. The dust stopped up the pores on the men's bodies. They were unable to perspire, and this brought on a stifling sensation that led in turn to acute dizziness. The blood thickened. Khorobrykh began to feel its weight in his body. It seemed as though glue were hardening in his veins.

\* The first lines of Lermontov's *Borodino*, included in school readers.—



The Turkmenians rammed at the hill. The heat seemed to drive them into a frenzy. The impact of their picks was merciless. Nobody gave any more thought to the genii of the hills.

They laughed at "King Menelaus" behind his back and called him a coward.

The old men crawled up to the tunnel and sat in its shade to watch a scene of seething activity unprecedented in the desert. They sat there and said that when the tunnel was finished they ought to remove their kibitkas to Bek-Tash, because the "man with the wooden narghile" (as they called Khorobrykh, who was never to be seen without his pipe) wanted to build a railroad between the northern section and Bek-Tash. They said that the Russians were sending down collapsible houses, which would never be infested with fleas as are the kibitkas, and that Moscow had ordered all the Turkmenian children to be taught grammar, and that industrial plants would soon be going up in the desert. And a city as beautiful as Khiva would be built.

Baril was right—they had got the nomads started.

The rich imagination of the desert folk was composing legends about all the innovations on the shores of the Kara-Bugaz.

"King Menelaus" groaned and complained—they were saying that in a few decades the desert would blossom out into gardens and that spring water would sparkle in the cotton plantations.

The woman with the glass machine on her nose had told them that people were already learning how to make rain and that abundant and invigorating showers would soon be pouring down over the desert. Allah had made a mistake and had had him, "Menelaus," born too early. Now he would have to die without ever seeing his native desertland blossoming like the shores of happy Meshed-i-Sar.

"Menelaus" had been to Meshed-i-Sar, on the Persian coast, in his youth, and all his life had kept telling everybody about its orange groves, and about the forests of nut trees hanging over the sea like the rich rugs hanging over the balconies of houses during the national festivals.



"Meshed-i-Sar!" he would exclaim, and cry from weakness, trying to picture his homeland—the wells of Suili—surrounded by groves of plane trees and rustling grasses.

Day by day life became less and less comprehensible and afforded rich food for reflection and conjectures.

A strange machine was brought to the gulf. It dug up the gulf bottom. Then a second machine came which was to suck the thick waters up from the bottom of the gulf and pump them into the canal leading to Lake No. 6. Khamkim barked at the new machines for two days. Then he went mad and was shot by Guzar.

And then a *baiga* was announced. The idea had come to Khorobrykh during one of his sleepless nights.

"We will start a competition in the sands," he warned Baril one morning with an enigmatic smile.

Baril looked at him suspiciously: again this clever albeit mad engineer was up to some mystification. What sort of competition could he be talking about with the thermometer at 65 degrees Centigrade above?

Lately, Baril had been occupying herself with the Turkmenian women. Almost all of them had some neglected disease or other. At thirty the Turkmenian women were already old; they stopped bearing children and covered their smelly mouths with kerchiefs.

The work in the tunnel was coming to an end. The two parties at each end were closing in on each other and were scheduled to meet any day now. It was at this point that Khorobrykh announced a *baiga* to be held in the tunnel.

A *baiga* is a contest of crack horsemen. One of the riders carries a sheep, and the winner is the one who snatches it from him while riding at top speed and gallops with it up to the jury's tent, keeping well out of reach of his hot pursuers.

Khorobrykh had decided that the Turkmenians could be made to grasp the conception of competition only by way of comparison. And so he called shock work a *baiga*. The best worker, the best labourer of the lot, would be the one to break through the last layers of marl and to thrust his hand through the gap to the men on the other side.



Six volunteers were placed at each end, and the *baiga* commenced. The oldsters crept gingerly into the tunnel, since theirs was the final word.

The work was accompanied by whistles, shouts and laughter. Each large chunk of marl broken off the wall gave rise to terrific excitement. The hill hummed and shook.

Baril drove the children away from the entrance to the tunnel, where the men were shouting so frenziedly that it seemed they were fighting to the very death. Baril laughed as she dragged the children away. Beads of perspiration kept trickling down her tired face and finally swept the pince-nez off her nose. It fell to the ground and broke. The children dashed away. Just then the tunnel resounded with such a terrible roar that Baril gave a violent start and stopped looking for the broken bits of glass.

The two parties had met. Guzar had broken through first. By evening the tunnel was finished.

The old men returned home greatly excited. The *baiga* in the tunnel had reminded them of their youth and the races held on the Mangyshlak chalk plateaus. Everybody was surprised that Guzar had broken through first and not Niya-zov, who was considered the strongest of all the labourers.

Baril squinted and smiled in confusion. The whole gulf was wrapped in a mist in which the lost stars, and the campfires, and the red coals in Khorobrykh's pipe, wandered, and the water and the blue sulphate shimmered. Her near-sightedness made the familiar places look like the stage settings of a gay play.

Guzar was given the first certificate to be issued at the section, informing all and sundry that he was the best shock worker and labourer along the entire shore.

Guzar hid the paper inside his shirt and went off to drink green tea with the old men—a great honour accorded only the finest horsemen.

Khorobrykh could not restrain himself from writing an appeal to the nomads that very evening. He wanted to dispatch it to the neighbouring camps so as to recruit workers for the new narrow-gauge railroad.

A line thirty kilometres long was to be built from the section to the shore of the Caspian, where a wharf had been



built on Bek-Tash when the gulf was in the hands of the Daghestan Lights Glassworks. Now the sulphate was transported to the sea on Turkmenian boats. This was very expensive—fifteen rubles per ton. The boats spent days at a time near the sand bar, waiting for the storms to abate. During gales the bar was very dangerous; the shore in the vicinity of the strait was black with the flotsam of wrecked rowboats and schooners.

“Nomads!” Khorobrykh wrote. “Soviet power has ruled that our country be turned into flowering fields and gardens. In the Kara-Bugaz we have begun to extract a wonderful salt out of which glass is made and food to produce bumper harvests of grapes, cotton and sorghum.

“Nomads! Fold up your tents and go to Lake Ala-Tepe, where you will be given water and food. Abandon your wanderings over the dead wastes and become workingmen, for new times have come. Everything is mortal, and the old life is dying. Do not believe what the long tongues of the old men are babbling—they have grown mean from their unhappy life.”

In the morning Guzar again galloped off to the camps in the neighbourhood, and in the evening of the next day the first camels, loaded with camel’s-hair wadding, bent sticks and children, solemnly trod along the barren shores in the direction of Ala-Tepe.

Baril arranged a meeting of the workers in honour of Guzar’s certificate. For the first time the timid women came to the meeting. They sat in the back, afraid even of whispering.

Baril searched a long time in her suitcase for a spare pince-nez, did not find it, grew upset and came late to the meeting. When she approached the tent of “Menelaus,” the black circle of Turkmenians did not stir. Old Bekmet was again telling one of his tall stories, but it was evidently a particularly fascinating one, for even Guzar could not tear his eyes away from the old mumbling mouth.

Baril drew near and listened. Bekmet was in the middle of his story.

Baril was not fond of legends. Those who have been to the East treat the famous Eastern legends with great



reserve. Idle story tellers have a legend to explain the name of every lake, city and river of Central Asia.

But Bekmet's legend was out of the ordinary. Rocking back and forth, he related:

"... So he said to Faireddin: 'Here people boast of their rich wheat and sweet grapes, of their leather and soft wool, of their tall forests and tasty fish. And what are the riches of your land?' Faireddin remained silent. Lenin again spoke. 'Here everybody has come to the congress in Moscow, and each has spoken about his country, but you alone say nothing. Say your word, friend, do not be afraid. What do the people do in your country, what do you expect from time?'

"Faireddin began to weep. He stretched his arms out to the windows, and there, outside, tall grasses were growing by the river, and the wind drifting into the palace bore with it the fragrance of luxuriant trees, called limes.

"And so Faireddin said: 'Comrade, what can I, an old Turkmenian of the tribe of Abdall, say to all of you? What can we expect from time, when time steals from us the last drops of water in the wells and buries yesterday's vineyards under sand? I am from the country which is called Ust-Urt, and also the Kara-Kum. We are rich in poverty and thirst, in sand and salt. You, *ioldash*, think about the happiness of the destitute, and we think about water. But there is no water! Allah has dried our land to a depth of ten elbows, and even the rain dries before it reaches the earth. Rivers flow beneath the sands, but their waters are as bitter as the skin of a Persian orange. Our land has been declining ever since the days of Tamerlane. What can we do, comrade? Below us all the lands are occupied, above us all the lands are occupied, and there is no place for us on earth. You are great, you are powerful. You are a big man and you have a sensitive ear and a keen eye, but how can you help us Turkmenians? That is why I keep silent at the great congress.'

"Then Lenin laughed and replied to the old fool Faireddin: 'What Allah cannot do and Tamerlane cannot do, the Bolsheviki can do, Faireddin.'

"Faireddin shook his head.



"‘If you walk with a hunchback,’ he replied, ‘then do not stand to your full height, that his hunch might not be conspicuous. If you speak with a man from the Kara-Kum, then do not laugh at him and do not promise him the impossible.’

"Thus replied Faireddin and went off in vexation.

"But the miracle did happen. At the approach of autumn the rumour reached Faireddin’s tent that many engineers had come to Khorezm, and that many machines, looking like camels of iron, had come; that cement was being unloaded from boats and that the Bolsheviks intended to pour water into the ancient bed of the Amu Darya, called the Uzboi, which had been dry for thousands of years. The Uzboi winds away from the river into the most waterless part of the desert, ten days’ travel by caravan.

"Faireddin laughed at the childishness of the Bolsheviks. They did not know that here the Uzboi had a bed of firm sand, and there a bed of sand that sucks in water like a thousand oxen who have not drunk for three days. You could pour a whole sea into the Uzboi, and yet the sand would soak it up in the space of an hour, leaving only dead fish and a bitter foam on the surface. You cannot conquer the desert, and it was not for nothing that camels and *sak-saul* were created. Faireddin laughed, but the Bolsheviks kept digging their canal and building a dam. They poured cement over those parts of the Uzboi that were covered with shifting sands.

"And then came the day of great triumph. The clear waters of the Amu rushed into the Uzboi, and the sand did not steal a single bucketful.

"In a few years the sands will be covered with cotton and grapes, *karagachi* and dates. The impoverished land, dry as the tongue of a dog perishing of thirst, will drink water as men drink wine.

"Faireddin slaughtered a ram, treated everybody, cried, and gave the little children his green turban to play with, the one he had bought in Mecca where he had shed many a tear on the black rock of the Prophet. And now the old fool Faireddin has the job of distributor of water at the new canal, and he walks about proudly, like a camel, for



a camel thinks he is more clever than man because he looks down on him from above."

When Bekmet had finished, the Turkmenians glanced mutely at Baril. They were waiting.

"Comrades!" she said, choking on a lump in her throat. "Comrades, I cannot tell you anything better than Bekmet."

Then Bekmet rose. He bowed low to Baril, touched the hard ground with his shrivelled fingers, and said with dignity:

"You should not have been angry at me, woman. Clever people say: 'When a country flourishes it gives birth to bards and heroes, and when it dies it gives nought but dust and many officials.' You have been born to be heroes, and I am a stupid old bard."

Baril returned home and blew her nose for a long time behind her curtain. Khorobrykh feigned surprise and asked her where she had managed to pick up a cold. His questions ended in her bursting out from behind the curtain in a fine rage.

"Go to the devil!" she cried. "You boast that you've made an excavator out of some nasty kerosene drums. You'd really think you were a genius! Was it worth studying to become an engineer for that! The whole lot of you are not worth the old liar Bekmet alone."

"Comrade Baril," replied Khorobrykh. "You are undermining my authority. I have appointed Bekmet foreman. By the way, do you know that he used to be a wandering minstrel?"

That evening Baril took a long walk up the beach. The stars that had looked like little grains through the lenses of her pince-nez now glimmered in the water of the gulf like misty lanterns.

She recalled the events of that day and smiled at the gulf. It lay soundless at her feet. The threads of the stars' reflections seemed like the luminous tracks of mirabilite crystals slowly falling to the bottom. Hundreds of grey butterflies, smelling of bitter wormwood, fluttered about her and tickled her face.



## NATURE'S GROSS MISTAKE

IN THE CASPIAN Sea Sailing Directions compiled in 1877 we read: "There is no spring water on the whole of the littoral from Mangyshlak to Atrek, with the exception of the Balkui spring located on the heights in the northern part of the Gulf of Krasnovodsk. This spring, however, yields such a ridiculously small amount of water that it would not be worth mentioning it if it did not happen to be the only one on the entire littoral."

There are maps appended to the Sailing Directions, in which the Gulf of Kara-Bugaz is marked by a white spot.

In the Large Soviet Encyclopedia we learn that water is to be found in the deserts around the Kara-Bugaz only in the spring, in small clayey pools. The nomads water their cattle in these pools. But they dry up quickly, and the nomads hasten to drive their herds north to the grassy plains near Temir.

The scientists are quite polite in describing the water in the wells found in the vicinity of the Kara-Bugaz: "the water is comparatively fresh," "saline," "disagreeable to the taste." But sometimes they also declare, more resolutely: "putrid," and "unfit for drinking."

The travellers of old wrote of blossoming oases in these places. Though their stories are legendary and vague, as is the entire history of the Oriental countries, there should be a grain of truth in them.

Finally, Semenov-Tyan-Shansky called the Transcas-pian deserts lands bereft of their water.

They once had water. This is evidenced by the numerous dead wells scattered about in the hills along the shore of the gulf. There is nothing at the bottom of these wells now but cracked clay.

In 1927, an engineer named Ronkin found several splendid dry wells near Cape Umchall. Their walls were faced with smoothly-polished stone. Near them lay stone watering troughs. Part of the wells on the southern shore had been ruined during the wars between the Yomuds and the Kazakhs.



When the Kara-Bugaz Sulphate Trust came to the gulf, there was no fresh water there. Only on Northern Spit were some wells having a small quantity of good water found. The fresh water lay on top in a thin layer and had to be removed with the greatest caution: the slightest shaking rendered it salty at once. Similar wells near Cape Bek-Tash yield twenty-five thousand buckets of water a day.

Both the trust, which in 1931 had already extracted five hundred thousand tons of sulphate and built its first small settlement (complete with asphalted sidewalks) near the strait, and the future chemical works, needed water. Nature's gross mistake, in robbing the world's richest deposits of that "periodic mineral"—mirabilite—of water, had to be corrected.

A search was begun for water. At first the undertaking seemed completely hopeless. Even the maps of these places give off a thirsty dryness.

The nomads know that in the yellow sands there is always water. It only has to be brought out. A nomad dying of thirst tries to reach the nearest yellow sands, where water is almost always to be found near the surface. But the clayey stretches are deadly. There is never any water there.

There are large expanses of yellow sands on Cape Um-chall. Here, at a depth of no more than seventy metres, wet, fresh-water sands were discovered.

In the Bolshiye Balkhany Hills, sixty kilometres southeast of the gulf, excellent fresh springs yielding twenty-five thousand cubic metres of water a day have been discovered. The works will require eighty-five thousand cubic metres daily, however. The Bolshiye Balkhany Hills are hardly explored. There should be much more than twenty-five thousand cubic metres of water there. In these hills, besides, the spring rain waters can easily be checked by small dams, which would almost treble the water supply.

Old manuscripts recorded from the words of caravan leaders say that in the ravines of Karyn-Yaryk, in the northeastern corner of the gulf, there are springs where one may water a hundred and twenty camels. There is every ground



to believe that these abundant subterranean sources will be discovered there.

The past calls down to the present. The leaders of the caravans traversing the routes from Kungrad to the Emba left notes behind for their colleagues, thinking in the simplicity of their hearts that caravans would keep crossing the deserts for thousands of years to come. Now these notes are being deciphered, and the researchers chuckle as they figure out how much water a camel can drink and, consequently, the size of the ancient sources.

Our chemists, working on the artificial dehydration of Kara-Bugaz mirabilite according to Leblanc's method, have discovered that enough good fresh water is obtained as a by-product to alleviate considerably the water famine in both the chemical works and the first Socialist city to go up in the desert. A section of this city has already been built; it is called Port Kara-Bugaz.

Still there is not enough water. There is enough for the future population of the Kara-Bugaz, but not for the chemical works. Therefore, it is proposed to build large distilleries. This will be best. The distilleries will operate on the waste gases of the works and will raise production costs by no more than two or three per cent.

Not long ago experiments in utilizing brackish sea water for industrial purposes were begun in Leningrad. They are coming along well. If they prove successful, there will be no need for distilleries. The water of the Caspian will be used at the works, and there will also be plenty of good drinking water, afforded by the sources mentioned above.

The water problem gave rise to a battle among the specialists. The minority frowned at the mere mention of the Kara-Bugaz. They consider that the sulphate should be extracted on the gulf, but processed in Daghestan. These specialists laugh at the idea of building a works on the Kara-Bugaz. The lack of water, the lack of fuel, the lack of greenery, the fierce heat—all these are insurmountable difficulties to them. Fortunately, there are very few such specialists.

The opinion of the majority of the specialists won out. They asserted that the works should be built on the Kara-Bugaz and nowhere else. Even if production costs are two



or three per cent higher, what can this mean in the face of the enormous political and cultural significance the works will have in conquering the desert lands of the U.S.S.R. and in industrializing Turkmenistan?

On the contrary, say the specialists who disdain professional mistrust, the surmounting of those great difficulties, the necessity of wrenching water, coal, oil and phosphorites from the desert all speak in favour of building the works on the Kara-Bugaz. The works will deal the desert a mortal blow. The extraction of water and oil and the mining of coal will cause oases to spring up around the works, whence a methodical offensive against the sands will be launched. The oases will grow, the sands will retreat, and the regions that have lost their water will win it back again from the desert. Possessing water, these sun-flooded regions can be brought to an unparalleled state of prosperity.

While the hydrographers are poring over ancient documents in their search for water in the sands of Umchall, in the Bolshiye Balkhany Hills, in the ravines of Karyn-Yaryk and on the shore of Cape Bek-Tash, real water is being transported from Baku in the holds of steamers.

The trust rebuilt the holds of two steamers of the Caspship (Caspian Shipping Line), the *Poltoratsk* and the *Islam*, for the transportation of water. But the Caspship—the name sends a shudder through every one of the trust's employees—fears the gulf as scorpions fear fire. It sends the *Poltoratsk* and the *Islam* out on the Persian routes, leaving the water to be carried in the filthy, kerosene-smelling holds of the *Frunze* and the *Dzerzhinsky*. The Caspship would not stop to think twice before abandoning the whole of the Kara-Bugaz to a waterless fate. There have been cases when it caused the daily water ration of the trust's workers to be reduced from two buckets to a quarter of a bucket.

The *Frunze* and the *Dzerzhinsky* are two amazing steamers that haven't the slightest idea where they are sailing and why.

I waited ten days in Krasnovodsk for the *Frunze* to come and take me to the Kara-Bugaz. All this time she was wandering about somewhere off Hassan-Kuli, and nobody



in the whole wide world could say when this Flying Dutchman would show up in the Krasnovodsk waters.

The port master sympathized with me mournfully. I soon became a permanent fixture in the offices of the port authority.

I have a suspicion that my absence was felt by the office employees as acutely as would be the absence, say, of the Turkmenian watchman who had been sitting on the offices' doorstep for the last ten years. They grew used to me. They addressed me by my first name. I knew all the port news and made a careful study of the board carrying the ominous sign "Warnings to Seafarers," on which the weather reports were posted.

I arrived at the firm conclusion, which was later corroborated by experience, that in the Caspian there are only three calm days a year.

Finally I was roused one night and informed with great excitement that the *Frunze* had arrived. I dashed out to the wharf, only to hear the mate on duty remark in a lazy drawl that they weren't sure yet whether they were going to the Kara-Bugaz. Perhaps they would put off for Baku and get their tanks cleaned. In the morning I learned that the *Frunze* was going to Baku. Evil tongues whispered in my ear that the Caspship sailors were fond of cleaning their tanks for no simple reason.

This commendable habit was to be explained by the fact that all the men were from Baku and that the temptations of Baku life were as supermagnets to the ships.

Again I frequented the port offices, with the only difference that this time I was waiting not for the *Frunze*, but for the *Poltoratsk*, which was drifting around off the same mysterious Hassan-Kuli shore. The port master warned me with a sigh that the *Poltoratsk* might also change her course, and that I'd better go to Baku and wait there, where the waiting was not so dull.

Again I studied the storm warnings and answered the phone for the man on duty when that worthy soul was absent. My hand ached for two weeks afterward: the phone had to be ground like an organ, first with the right hand,



and when that hand was tired, with the left. After about a half hour of this the telephone operator would shout through the receiver:

"Where's the fire? Hang up!"

That is how the Caspship served the Kara-Bugaz. In 1930, it put the *Yan* in the gulf. The *Yan*, which carried a dredge, ran aground on the shallows and could not be removed. Thus she remained stranded for seven months, eaten to shreds by the corrosive waters. The holes in her sides were filled in with cement, but the water soon ate into that too. The rust fell off the ship in large chunks.

Aluminum is the only metal the Kara-Bugaz waters cannot corrode. Iron vessels can save themselves only by being constantly on the move. A stop for any length of time will immediately lead to corrosion of their hulls.

The Caspship was so frightened by what happened to the *Yan* that it removed the dredge from the gulf. The dredge had been used so that the salt suction machine (the one that was supposed to pump water into Lake No. 6) could be set up nearer to the shore. The dredge sailed away, even though it had only three hundred more metres to dig up. Three hundred metres of pipes had to be laid to the salt suction machine, and the water was pumped through them into the canal. The pipes greatly diminished the capacity of the machine. Instead of three metres of water, it was able to pump only thirty centimetres into the lake. The panicky flight of the Caspship from the gulf disrupted the work of basinization, which had been started with so much difficulty.

The Caspship sent a commission of captains down to investigate the famous bar—the bane of the Kara-Bugaz. In the summer of 1931 the bar had become so shallow that even motor boats could not pass across it. The captains proposed digging through the bar, but the chemists protested. They said it was a natural regulator of the flow of water from the Caspian Sea into the gulf. The chemists held that deepening the bar would inevitably lead to a change in the flow of the water, thus breaking up the regime of the Kara-Bugaz, which in turn might unfavourably affect the precipitation of mirabilite. The seamen then proposed building



a ship canal and sluice from the strait to the Kara-Bugaz, detouring the bar.

A special commission was appointed by the Academy of Sciences to solve the question. It decided that deepening the bar would not necessarily cause any changes in the properties of the Kara-Bugaz waters, since these properties are conditioned not only by the flow of water from the sea, but also by the subsoil waters, the soil surrounding the gulf, the chemical processes taking place in this soil, the temperature of the air, and several other factors.

Early in the spring of 1931 a conference on the Kara-Bugaz was convened in Moscow.

A heavy fog hung over the city, and through it an icy drizzle poured down. In the chilly greyness of the Moscow day, men scorched by the Kara-Kum sun ascended the dark rostrum and spoke of the strange gulf that was raging and steaming amid the salt marshes, by the harsh Sarmatian layers of Ust-Urt. Hundreds of photographs lay scattered over the tables. It was as if the cameras had all had a sun-stroke, so dazzlingly white were the sands, the sky, the salt and the gulf.

The conference on the Kara-Bugaz was strictly scientific, strictly industrial, but to the onlooker it was like a war council preparing to launch an unprecedented attack on the desert, to declare a relentless war on the gross and intolerable mistakes of nature.

I had carried my sporadic notes of this conference all over with me. They had become coated with the brown dust of the Emba fields and the salt of the Kara-Bugaz; they were faint and blurred, and now, in the saloon of an old steamer, I tried to make them out and copy them. The ship jerked along as though she were being tugged from behind by her bent red rudder. It was difficult to write. The steward cast sidelong glances at me and said in an undertone to the scrubwoman:

"A calculator!"

I sat over my notes till midnight, until the steward could contain himself no longer and began to turn out the lights in a huff and slam the heavy portholes shut.



I added to my notes scraps of conversation heard on the Kara-Bugaz. This done, the notes read as follows:

"The industrial development of the Kara-Bugaz, the founding of a large new industrial centre on the eastern shore of the Caspian, will greatly influence the entire economic setup and the entire life of Turkmenia. Nine-tenths of her territory is buried under the sands of the Kara-Kum. We will put into practice the slogan of the Party on industrialization of the border regions."

"The Gulf of Kara-Bugaz is a sea of white gold."

"The Kara-Bugaz workingmen are nomads. The productivity of their labour is still low. This year two thousand nomads were recruited for steady jobs. Seventy nomads have acquired the knowledge and experience of skilled workers."

"The Kara-Bugaz lives its own chemical life, distinguishable from that of the Caspian Sea. It is conditioned not only by the influx of the Caspian waters through the strait. It is conditioned by its own chemical process, in which its subsoil waters, its relief, its soil and the biochemical processes taking place in this soil inevitably participate."

"Besides mirabilite, the waters of the Kara-Bugaz contain tens of millions of tons of bromide; not far from the shore lie deposits of coal, barite, sulphur, lime, phosphorites and celestine."

"Despite the incredible difficulties of the road, Professor Ilyinsky did not spare himself and dragged himself to the Kara-Bugaz wastes to set the process of basinization going. He made the dangerous journey on camel, on foot and by sea."

*Speech by a Party functionary:*

"We shout about the Kara-Bugaz. We say big words and big words squared, i.e., big words about big words. But all this will remain a cacophony of words if the mo-



bilization of forces, cadres, and funds for the actual realization of these loud and pretty-sounding words do not follow in their wake.

"We must launch the construction of a research base on the Kara-Bugaz at once, without losing a single day."

*Objection by an old professor, very estimable albeit choleric:*

"Founding a scientific base on the Kara-Bugaz is so complicated a matter that nobody seems to be able to give himself a clear account of it. Do not forget that scientific workers must have good conditions and be supplied with instruments, a library and chemicals."

*Party functionary's reply to the professor that put an end to the polemic:*

"I do not want to be understood as saying that we will take fine scientists and send them to a desert where there are tigers and leopards, moreover send them there without any underwear. That's a very naive way of looking at it."

"There are indications that the waters of the Caspian Sea, being less salty than the waters of other seas, can be utilized in a number of industrial processes at the future Kara-Bugaz works. If it turns out that sea water can really be used in industrial processes, then things will be fine."

"It is our duty to revive the Kara-Bugaz. The Kara-Bugaz already has a population of about ten thousand. The bogey of the Kara-Bugaz has been wiped out."

"Nobody has the slightest doubts about the necessity of developing the extraction of mirabilite in the Kara-Bugaz on a grand scale."

"We must concentrate on the sulphate chemical products which will find extensive application in the national economy. Twenty-two industries cannot do without sulphate. We all know that soda is widely used in industry in Europe, America, and at home, in the U.S.S.R. We can



boldly say that in the near future the demand for soda in the U.S.S.R. will reach two million tons. The second sulphate product whose manufacture must be organized is sodium silicate, the raw material for the glass industry. Then we have caustic soda, sodium sulphate and several other chemical products. Sulphuric acid and sulphur (sulphate will produce the two side by side with soda and sodium silicate) will find wide application in our country. On the Caspian we already have a consumer of sulphuric acid—the oil industry.

“In the future, the production of sulphuric acid may be linked with the production of fertilizer, primarily out of Mangyshlak phosphorites. Then there still will be the export trade.”

“Academician Andrusov was the only man to traverse the eastern shore of the gulf, and he almost perished there. He could not find water anywhere and barely escaped death.”

“The Kara-Bugaz is inexhaustible. The annual amount of sulphate to be obtained there is enough to keep the entire chemical industry of the U.S.S.R. and Europe supplied for the next six hundred years.”

“The construction of the Kara-Bugaz chemical works will cost sixty-five million rubles. It will receive oil from Cheleken, Nebit-Dag (Neftedag) and Baya-Dag, and coal and phosphorites from Mangyshlak and Taur-Kyr.

“The sulphate will be processed by the old Leblanc method, the best in the conditions of the desert, since it requires very little water. An experimental plant is already being set up on the Kara-Bugaz to process sulphate according to this method. A town is springing up in the strait, and to the south and north of it two new seaports—Bek-Tash and Karshi—will be built. A railroad between the Sartas workings and the sea has already been laid. Another is planned from Krasnovodsk to Karshi.”

“The conference deems it expedient to ask the Council of People's Commissars of Turkmenistan to accelerate the



opening of a health resort on the Kara-Bugaz for the workers of the Kara-Bugaz and other districts, in order to stimulate the interest of the broad masses of the working people of the Soviet Union in the Kara-Bugaz."

For the third time I was crossing the Caspian Sea, now on my way back to Baku.

Our ship had delivered Shollar spring water to the Kara-Bugaz and was pervaded with the fresh smell of this water. She seemed to be sailing not over the sea but over a limpid fresh water lake and over the stars.

A typical dazzling night shone all around. From the Persian coast a tepid wind blew over, as from the windows of a flower shop left open for the night. It brought with it the scent of nut leaves rubbed between the fingers, of heavy foliage and moist grainy sands.

Beyond the stern the wake hummed, luminescent, and soon was lost in the midnight gloom. Huge stars rolled down into the distant, cooling sands. The starlight was brighter in the east than in the west; the aridity of the deserts lent it a tense glare. In the west the stars twinkled in moist air, amid the vapours of the hills; it was as though a sparkling liquid were rippling in crystal goblets.

I was accompanied by Prokofyev, a girl chemist from Moscow and a woman engineer, grey and tired, who looked more like a doctor.

The girl paced the deck in agitation. The wind ruffled her black dress and rippled the flag on the stern soothingly.

The lower deck cast dim stripes of light on the water. There teakettles clattered, hot water gushed into cups, and children laughed. There an atmosphere of land life prevailed. There the passengers felt just as they did on board a train. They did not heed the deep stillness in which the ship sailed smoothly west, to the coast of Europe.

The ship did not pitch or toss, but her heavy hulk rose and fell gently with the breathing of the sea.

"Well, here we've been round the whole territory," Prokofyev said to me. "We've seen the sands and the barren land, we've drunk salt water, and we've learned what the Kara-Bugaz is. All this is so. But have we enough imagi-



nation to picture the future of these lands? It would be interesting to check up on it. Let us question our companions."

The girl chemist replied without hesitation:

"It will be hot and noisy and gay. Like in Baku on a holiday. I'm in love with the Caspian steamers. They're painted such a nice yellow. A swarm of yellow ships will smoke away in the two new ports. Where will they be built? That's right, in Bek-Tash and Karshi. Khorobrykh will receive first prize at an agricultural fair for his Kara-Bugaz melons—the most fragrant and juciest melons in the world. Wind motors will pump the thick water out of the gulf and fill the basins with it. Academician Joffe will put up his first solar machines, and you and I will go down to the port in the evenings and drink nice iced sodas and orange juice under the acacias. Trains bearing the sign: 'Moscow-Kara-Bugaz *via* Tashkent-Krasnovodsk' will leave Moscow's Kazan Station. A resort will be opened on the strait, for there is no better swimming place in the whole of the Soviet Union. I think that'll do, won't it?"

The woman engineer thought of other things.

"You know," she murmured, "yesterday a Turkmenian woman, the wife of Ussein, told me: 'I want to work in the Women's Welfare Department, because women there become more clever than men.' I grew up in the East. I came to the Kara-Bugaz just as the first typewriter began to click in the kibitka of the director of the trust. Two years have passed since then, but the gulf is already unrecognizable. And so I'm thinking that things such as the future chemical works will strike at the old East, at Islam, at this whole petrified life, like thunder. The works will teach the people to read and write, will make them think, and will expose and obliterate the horrors of the nomad state of existence. The nomads had a song which ran like this: 'A nomad passes through life like dust. Nobody wants to know his name, nobody knows how much his sorrow weighs.' An end will be put to that."

Prokofyev said nothing.

"Can't you think of anything?" the girl chemist asked him.



"No," replied Prokofyev. "I don't have to think of anything since reality will surpass all my conjectures and I will feel ashamed of myself. I have no imagination. But here is what I am thinking about. You must have heard of the inexorable law of entropy. It states that thermal energy is the only form of energy on this earth that dissipates, but all forms of energy turn into thermal energy. The earth is constantly losing thermal energy as a result of radiation into the cosmos. The famous English physicist Thomson, who discovered this law, closes his book on the subject with funereal words. An irresistible dissipation of energy is taking place, he says, and after a certain time, a long time, true, a deathly quiet will descend over the earth, which will be transformed into an eternal cemetery.

"But the Kara-Bugaz and all those deserts cursed by men will destroy the law of entropy. The earth is senselessly giving off its thermal energy into the cosmos—into there"—Prokofyev waved his hand at the south, where the heavens shimmered and glowed with a conflagration of stars—"and we must make the deserts of Kara-Kum and the Kara-Bugaz the first and foremost reservoirs for capturing the energy of the sun, the very energy that we are receiving from the cosmos. We will balance the loss. This is a very daring challenge to the laws of the cosmos, especially in the eyes of the unenlightened. Here we will draw the solar energy, condense it, turn it into electricity, into warmth and light, into any other form of energy you please, and this region will blossom as the most luxuriant gardens of California perhaps never have blossomed.

"It is hard to get the best of the desert, particularly if a man feels he is doing it for the sake of his own monthly salary. The important thing is to understand that your work in the desert is a deed of glory, the task of the lofty tribe of new men—and that is what it actually is—and the difficulties will drop off like perspiration after a swim in the sea. So never let the distant horizons fall out of your vision. Remember that only the nearsighted whine. Let your imagination run free. Its force is extraordinary. Teach yourself to feel the times and to feel the future. Mastery of these two values is a great deal indeed."



We went to sleep in a cabin filled with the wind and the freshness of the sea.

Visions of cities built of sparkling, opalescent glass pursued me all night. They arose from transparent seas, and their reflections in the mirrors of gulfs were piles of crystal and warm motionless lights. Over them glowed summer dawns, dawns redolent of nut leaves, rubbed between the fingers, of heavy foliage, of Shollar waters and Mangyshlak wormwood.

I awoke. Prokofyev was arguing with the woman engineer about the properties of glass made of Kara-Bugaz sulphate. I went out on deck. We were rounding the Apsheron Lighthouse. Over Baku hung the fresh silence of night, and in the east, brushing away the stars, the sky swiftly spread its lofty sea blue above the Kara-Bugaz. Over the deserts of Khorezm a splendid new day, one of countless many, was rising.







COLCHIS







## THE WILD CAT

To him who shall destroy a cat, death.

*An ancient law of Mingrelia.*

THE WIND cast in through the *duhan* window a handful of dust and dry rose petals. The palms began to sway, their green leaves fluttering nervously. They made a sound like the gritting of teeth. The smoke from the chimneys raced low over the flat streets of Poti, drowning the fragrance of falling mandarin blossoms. The frogs in the town square stopped croaking.

"It's going to rain," said the young engineer, Gabunia.

He looked moodily out through the window. The glass bore the half-chalked-out legend: "Have a Bite."

The rain was moving slowly up from the sea. It spread over the water like heavy smoke, torn by white flashes—screaming sea gulls.

"It pours two hundred and forty days a year," Gabunia added.

"Fiery Colchis," muttered Lapshin. "The British scientist Murray figured it out that every year the earth gets ninety cubic kilometres of rain. As far as I can see, all ninety fall right here."

Gabunia was not impressed.

The *duhan* keeper, a fat Gurian, wheezed asthmatically. Nothing in the wide world mattered to him: not the engineers, lingering over their dinner; nor the old man with the staff, Artem Korkia, sitting glumly at an empty table; nor Becho, the self-taught migrant artist, nor even the approaching rain. He was sick with the heat and with his gloomy



thoughts. He drove the flies from the sticky wineglasses. Now and again, he fingered the beads of his abacus.

Becho was doing a remarkable painting on the *duhan* wall, in oils. The theme of his painting had been suggested by Gabunia. It depicted the Colchis of the future, when fragrant orange groves would bloom on what were now broad stretches of warm swampland. Golden fruits glowed like electric bulbs among dark foliage. Pink mountains steamed like smoke-crowned conflagrations. White steamers advanced through luxuriant growths of lotus blossom, and little boats carried women and girls in holiday attire. Mingrelians in felt hats and riding breeches banqueted in the groves. And an old man in a Circassian coat, his long, curly hair framing the face of Leonardo da Vinci, stood with his arms outstretched towards this childish landscape.

"Where'd he get hold of Leonardo?" Lapshin asked.

Gabunia flushed.

"From me," he said. "Why not?"

Lapshin shrugged his shoulders.

Slow raindrops beat heavily against the sidewalks. The *duhan* began to fill up with people seeking shelter from the rain. They dropped their eyes as they greeted the *duhan* keeper, embarrassed because they did not order. They all looked with interest at Becho's painting.

A buzz of admiration passed from table to table. The people clicked their tongues, amazed at the skill of this mild and unassuming man.

Noting the general enthusiasm, the *duhan* keeper sulkily dumped some cornmeal porridge and fried fish onto a plate, and poured a glass of tart wine. This he handed to Becho. It was the artist's daily wage.

Becho rinsed his hands with wine, and ate his meal. Then he sighed and sat back, with closed eyes, resting. Taking in the murmured praises, he thought to himself that the *duhan* might be co-operative, but just the same the boss was cheating him. The food wasn't anywhere near what had been agreed.

The rain grew louder, drowning out the voices of the people in the *duhan*. Water poured noisily through rain-pipes and pounded against closed windows. There was a hur-



ried pattering of raindrops on walls and signboards, like the hammering of a myriad tiny carpenters and tinsmiths.

The monsoon was blowing—the southwest wind. It swept the clouds before it like a herd of grey sheep, driving them against the wall formed by the Guria Mountains.

Another sound rose gradually to join the splashing and pattering, the whispering and gurgling, all the frivolous water sounds. It was a dull uproar of human voices, of guttural cries.

The people in the *duhan* flocked to the windows. A drenched throng was coming down the street. Little boys ran at its head. Behind them strode a tall, grim man with a gun slung over his shoulder. His eyes glittered fiercely. He carried a furry black beast, swinging it proudly by the tail. Blood and raindrops dribbled from its muzzle.

A little old man darted out of the barbershop next door to the *duhan*. His face was covered with lather. Blobs of lather spattered his grey Circassian coat. He touched the animal, and recoiled.

“*Rambavia!*” he cried. “You’ve shot a wild cat, *katso!*”

The crowd roared. The hunter entered the *duhan*. He threw the wet, slippery beast to the *duhan* keeper. The wineglasses tinkled. The whole room shook to the thud of the heavy carcass on the counter.

The *duhan* became very full. The people shouted as though life and death were at stake.

The bringer of the beast brushed the raindrops from his face with the palm of his hand. In dull, stern tones, he said to the *duhan* keeper:

“Buy the skin, manager.”

A hush fell over the crowd. Not a word must be missed in this extraordinary deal! A deal in the skin of a wild cat—perhaps the last wild cat ever to be shot in Colchis’ swampy forests.

The *duhan* keeper turned his yellow eyes on the beast. He did not say a word. A young girl with a hen under her arm and a bunch of roses in her hand climbed onto a chair to get a better view. The hen stopped pecking at the rose petals. It squawked, and tried to flap its wings. Then old Artem Korkia shouted, brandishing his staff:



"Curses on your head, *katso*! You've shot a cat. In the old days, the punishment was death."

"I beg your pardon," said the owner of the beast, scowling darkly at Korkia. "I beg your pardon for contradicting my elders. Only this is no cat."

The crowd gasped. Only now did it realize that the beast was truly no wild cat. It looked more like an enormous rat, this furry carcass lying on the counter.

"What is it, then, if it's no cat?" demanded Korkia, perplexed.

"For God's sake, what's your hurry?" yelled the hunter, in barely suppressed fury. "Use your eyes!"

Gabunia and Lapshin elbowed their way to the counter. The creature was a strange one. Its powerful hind paws had yellow webs. Its long, hairless tail hung almost to the ground.

The crowd was at a loss. All eyes were fixed expectantly on the *duhan* keeper. But he maintained a sullen, wheezing silence.

It was then that Vano Akhmetelli made his appearance. Vano was a post-graduate student of the Fur Institute. He advanced easily through the staring crowd, as though he were crossing a deserted square. Close on his heels came Grisha, the little militiaman, with his whistle in his hand.

Vano strode up to the counter. He lifted the beast by its tail. Grisha blew his whistle and started pushing back the crowd. Some people were stubborn, and he shouted at them, making a mock of human curiosity:

"I suppose you'll die if you don't see! Don't be so inquisitive! It makes me laugh to watch such foolish people!"

"Where'd you shoot it?" Vano asked the hunter, drawing together his shaggy brows.

"At the Turkish Canal."

"What's your name?"

"Gulia."

"Well then, Gulia," said Vano quietly, "you've killed forbidden game. You'll get two weeks for it."

Gulia snorted in disgust. Then, with a terrible glance at Vano, he muttered:



"Rats' watchman! Will you put me in jail if I kill a frog?"

"Don't get excited, *katso*. They'll let you talk in court. Grisha, take him to the station."

The crowd followed Grisha and Gulia out of the *duhan*. The hunter was fuming. Again he carried the beast by its tail; but his erstwhile pride was gone. The beast's head bumped along the wet sidewalk.

The rain was growing less. It came down in a light drizzle.

Gabunia, Vano and Lapshin remained in the *duhan*.

"What sort of creature was that?" Lapshin asked.

"Don't you know?" cried Vano, feigning surprise. "Argentine nutria, from Rio Negro."

"Pardon my ignorance," returned Lapshin icily. "I never was a zoologist, you know. My job is botany."

"Your job is the humid subtropics. Seems to me you ought to know."

Gabunia tried to turn the conversation, which threatened to develop into a quarrel. Every time Vano and Lapshin met, there were sure to be sharp words. Vano disliked the young botanist for his shaggy American suits, and for his elaborate manners. It seemed to Vano that the botanist held himself above Soviet affairs, like some puffed-up foreigner.

Rudeness always distressed Gabunia. He was very shy. He was a tall man, with the yellow film of malaria clouding his ever-smiling eyes.

"Nutria," he said flushing, "is the most quarrelsome beast in the world."

This announcement was received with complete indifference. Vano threw Gabunia a bitter glance.

"When you drain the swamps and turn Colchis into those wonderful groves Becho's painting," he said, "the nutria will die. You're the chief nutria killer. They need jungles, not lemon groves. How can I help feeling bad about it?"

They all looked at Becho's painting. The rain had stopped. The sunlight came down through the magnolia trees, and the foliage turned it into a greenish haze. In this soft light, Becho's painting appeared to Gabunia in an entirely new aspect. He felt a desire to touch the heavy fruits.



"Feeling bad about what?" he asked abstractedly.

"About the work I've put in," Vano replied. "I've spent two whole years on those damned beasts. I answer for their breeding. I hate to think of all that work thrown away. And it's a shame about the jungle, too. Your excavators have scared the wild boar away. Even the jackals are running off to the mountains."

"And good riddance to them!"

Lapshin left. He would have liked to ask Vano how Argentine nutria came to be living in Colchis; but he refrained.

He found the world around him an unpleasant place. He did not like this flat, swampy country, with its fanciful name. He did not like the warm, protracted rains; the muddy rivers, rushing seaward at express-train speed; the wooden houses, built on piles, or the *duhans*, where he was served tepid wine that tasted of castor oil.

It began to drizzle again. The sun disappeared. And, as always when it rained, the town was suffused with odours—odours so intense that one could all but touch them. There was the soft fragrance of the eucalypts, the clinging perfume of roses, and the tart lemon smell that crinkled your finger tips. But this lasted only until the first gust of the monsoon. When the wind came rustling through the orchards, turning up the leaves and filling the streets with dust, everything would change. The scented vapours, source of headache and indolence, would be submerged in the acrid sea smells that swept through the town.

Gabunia loved the winds. They seemed to blow the malarial weakness from his limbs.

"When will that fellow come up for trial?" he asked.

"In a couple of days," Vano told him.

Gabunia took his leave of Vano, and went out into the street. The Rion was roaring wildly, rocking its bridges, rolling its liquid clay to the sea. Gabunia walked slowly in the direction of the harbour. Malaria had made its imprint on his very gait.

He reflected that it was his own soft nature that made things so awkward for him. He always tried to avoid any talk with Vano. He could not rid himself of an altogether unjustified feeling of guilt in regard to Vano, because he,



Gabunia, was draining the Colchian swamps—digging canals—rooting up the virgin forest—burning the jungles where the nutria bred.

The animals had been brought from Argentina, a task of no small difficulty, and released in the Colchian swamps to breed. For two successive summers, Vano had been studying their development. He told wonderful tales about their precious fur. In the West, he said, it was all but worth its weight in gold.

They multiplied rapidly. Nobody ever saw them, however, but Vano and a few Mingrelian hunters, who described the beasts as inveterate fighters. Nutria will battle for days and nights on end, and always to the death. They are extremely timid, and ordinarily no man can come within a hundred paces of them; but when fighting they lose all sense of fear, and a man can easily approach and pull the combatants apart by their tails. The battle is always begun in the same manner, each beast making for its rival's jaws and attempting to break the teeth. Nutria can stay under water for five full minutes without coming up for air.

Gabunia found it hard to understand how Vano could devote himself to these repulsive creatures.

Vano's study of the nutria often kept him in the swamps for months on end. And as time progressed he began to sing the praises of the Colchian jungles—of the airless, liana-twined forests, the stagnant lakes, the wild, putrescent, malaria-ridden vegetation.

Vano called the Colchian forests tropical, though the trees were almost exclusively northern alder and rhododendron. It was a strange intermingling of north and south. The alders grew with fabulous rapidity. In three years, a fresh clearing would become impassable forest.

Gabunia sensed Vano's unexpressed hostility to the draining project under way in Colchis. Vano frankly rejoiced at the slow pace of the work, which was held up by malaria, floods, and rains, and by the stranding of excavators in the swamps.

Gabunia knew that, sooner or later, Vano would have to be fought. And yet, he sometimes felt a twinge of pity as the excavators pushed step by step into Vano's land of



legend. For they rent the lianas; they bailed the water and the dark-gold carp out of the lakes; they drove the wild boar and the nutria to the sea. They left a wake of ugly ditches, mounds of sticky clay, and rotting stumps.

The forests of Colchis stood knee-deep in water. The slimy soil afforded but scant root-hold for the trees. To fell a tree, the workers had only to throw a chain around it, and pull. This was perfectly safe. The trees never dropped all the way to the ground. The thorny lianas, thick as a man's arm, would catch and hold them. The forests were thickly overgrown with buckthorn and clematis, bramble and fern.

It was stupendous—the vigour of the vegetation. The clematis climbed trees, and snapped their trunks like blades of grass. The bramble seemed to grow as you watched it. A summer would add two metres to its height.

No grass grew in these forests. They were dark and airless. There were almost no birds. Instead, there were bats. Dormant, impassable, the forests stood on, veiled in a mist of warm rains.

When a wind blew, the dark forests would suddenly turn to mercury. The alder leaves, turned up by the wind, were a silvery grey on their under sides.

Days, months, and years unnumbered, the forests had murmured and swayed, rolling waves of dull silver. And Gabunia could well understand Vano's soreness of heart. He, too, felt sorry, at times, that the forests must go.

Engineer Kahiani, chief of the Colchis draining project, took a much simpler view of things. He had no eye for the forests, or the lily-grown lakes, or the countless creeping rivers, in their green tunnels of foliage. All this was scheduled for destruction; it was but an obstacle, standing in his way.

Kahiani thought Vano a young fool. A careless shrug and grunt were his only response to Vano's fervent pleas in defence of jungle and nutria. Kahiani's lips were set in a bitter grimace that never relaxed. It came from too much quinine, people said. Kahiani would chew up the bitter stuff unhurriedly, and gulp it down without water.

Any regret for the fate of these virgin forests, for the fate of that which belonged to the past, was a feeling completely



alien to him. He believed that Nature, when left to herself, was inevitably bound to decline and degenerate. In support of this thesis, he would languidly cite the works of prominent men of science. It was not, to his mind, a topic worthy of even the briefest discussion.

As to Gabunia, Kahiani considered him a capable engineer, but one too inclined to dreaming. "Engineering romancer," he called him. Kahiani was always cross when he chanced upon a volume of Bagritsky or Musset in Gabunia's room.

"The only real classics," he would say, "are mathematics. All the rest is hot air."

Vano's only sympathizer was old engineer Pakhomov, the author of imposing schemes for the draining of the Colchian swamps. Bending over his blueprints, Pakhomov would sometimes declare, with a sigh:

"I'm glad I won't live to see it finished. Really, I am. It's a pity, after all, destroying Nature."

But he would go right on to plot a new network of canals through the virgin forests he had just bewailed, and his pencil would tap the desk in triumph as he exclaimed:

"There! Another two thousand hectares for citrus plantations. Not so bad!"

The old man had his peculiarities. It was he who had talked Becho into adding Leonardo to the painting on the *duhan* wall.

"What are you thinking of, friend?" he demanded reproachfully. "Painting Colchis' future, and leaving out the world's first drainage and irrigation engineer—Leonardo da Vinci!"

Becho glanced at him suspiciously.

"Leonardo was an artist," he protested.

"That's beside the point. He was a wonderful artist, but he was also a great engineer."

It was after this conversation that Becho asked Gabunia for a picture of the great Italian.

Pakhomov's name was closely associated with the mysterious new word, *colmatage*. This word designated a system of swamp drainage that people talked about as they might of a flight to Mars, or of transforming the Sahara into a sea. It was fantastic. But of that, later.



Having occasion to be in town for two days, Gabunia, who was in charge of construction at the main canal in the Chaladidi forest, now wandered through the port in search of Captain Chup. Chup was the port inspector. Gabunia wanted him to send a couple of sailors out to run a dredging machine at the canal.

Frequently as Gabunia visited Poti, the town and port impressed him ever anew as places quite outside the ordinary. And so it was today.

Evening fell as Gabunia walked about the port. The wharves smelled of crabs and sea slime. Signal lights hung low over the uneasy water. The surf beat a doleful refrain against the breakwater, a sleepy lullaby.

Over the town, the clouds had gathered again. The street lamps lit them dully from below. Frogs were bel-  
lowing in the swamps.

Gabunia skirted an iron warehouse, and found himself on a broad wharf. Here he stopped for a while. The *Abkhasia* was entering the harbour. She came from Batum. Mirrored blue stars contracted and spread with the rise and fall of the water. They softened the white glare of the ship's reflected lights. The *Abkhasia* was like a hollow crystal, lit from within.

She blew her whistle. The sound was low, but wrathful. Colliding with the low-hung, cloudy sky, it spread out and out, like slow circles over water. Echo called sadly back from the Chaladidi woods, and then returned once more, now barely audible, from the Guria Mountains.

The *Abkhasia* swung heavily around. The port grew noisy with shouts, and the sound of running water, and childish laughter, and the rumble of windlasses.

Veteran anglers savagely drew in their lines, heaping invective on the devil's fools of ships that spoiled their fishing.

## "WHITE HAIR"

A YOUNG WOMAN got off a steamer, late that night, leading by the hand a little girl of about seven. The steamer was a freight and passenger boat. It gave off a stale odour of hides and oil that could be smelled a mile away. Making



fast to the pier, it put out its lights and relapsed into silence.

The woman stopped beside her valises and looked about her, with an anxious frown. There was nobody to be seen. The other passengers, three or four Mingrelians, had made off with light, almost dancing gait into the darkness, evidently in the direction of the town.

Water splashed on every side. The sea droned in dull indifference.

"How do I get to town?" the woman asked the darkness, hoping that someone might hear; but no answer came. The little girl sat on a valise, looking up at her mother. She was frightened.

Christophor Christophoridi, ten-year-old bootblack, crept through the shadowed port. He carried a bamboo fishing rod, and also his box of brushes and polish.

Christophoridi was an angler infatuate. He liked to fish by night, when he could appropriate the place beside the winking beacon—the best spot for scad. The dampness kept him shivering. His nose was always running, and his lips would grow so stiff with cold that by morning he would lose the gift of speech. But he bore every trial with magnificent fortitude.

Christophoridi was in a hurry. He could only fish until eight o'clock in the morning, when he must drop in at the homes of the port employees—Captain Chup, and the cashier, and the pilot—and black their boots. That left him a bare three hours. His professional visits done, Christophoridi would station himself at the bus stop in the port, where he would earn perhaps two rubles in the course of the day on shines. This was a little-frequented, and therefore unprofitable stand. Christophoridi had chosen it because of the insuperable urge that drew him to the sea.

Though Christophoridi was in a hurry, he paused outside the little house where Chup had his home, and peeped in through an open window. The house stood just off the jetty, in the most deserted section of the port. When there was a storm at sea, the spray would fly in at the captain's windows.

There were three people inside. They sat puffing out thick clouds of tobacco smoke over the table, which, despite



the late hour, was set for tea. Christophoridi knew them all: Chup, engineer Gabunia, and a lanky English sailor known in the port as Syoma.

Syoma had missed his ship when it sailed from Poti, and now he hung around the town at a loose end. When asked, "Who are you?" he would reply in English, "Seaman." Chup had turned that into the Russian name Semyon, and the little boys had shortened it to Syoma.

"Who's that outside the windows?" Chup shouted ferociously.

Christophoridi turned and ran. From a safe distance, he shook his fist at the window. He was not afraid of Chup, but he did expect some trouble. Chup could not tolerate anglers roaming the port at night. Then Christophoridi heard a child crying, and a woman's voice said:

"Don't cry, Yolochka. We'll find somebody right away."

Christophoridi moved towards the voices. A quick-witted lad, he understood at once that the woman must be a stranger to Poti, arrived by the night boat. The bus to town, he knew, would not be running for another four hours, and there were no cabs at night.

Christophoridi decided to speak to the woman. He felt sorry for the little girl. At a loss how to begin, he sang out:

"Shine your shoes?"

"Silly boy!" returned the woman, laughing. "Who ever heard of shining shoes at night?"

And so the talk began. The woman was delighted. What could be better, in a strange and deserted port at night, than to meet a bootblack—and an angler, too, at that? Fishing makes people good-natured and talkative; and bootblackening brings its disciples a great store of practical information. Inquiry offices have no function in a town with a good crop of bootblacks.

Christophoridi, besides his valuable qualities as bootblack and angler, had the additional gift of enthusiasm. The woman's helpless situation inspired a torrent of wonderful ideas. But what could he do to help? It was three kilometres to the Black Sea Hotel, in town. He could never drag her luggage that far.



His meditation, however, was brief. A few slow drops came down, first tokens of the rain that in Poti precedes the dawn.

"Wait here—I'll be right back," said Christophoridi, and disappeared, leaving his box of brushes and his fishing rod at the woman's feet.

He ran as fast as he could to Chup's. Breathless with the extraordinary events of the night, he panted out his story to the captain. Chup grumbled something about his house not being a waiting room. Then he got up slowly and said, with a menacing glare at Christophoridi:

"She can stay here till morning. I'm on duty all night anyway. Show us the way, youngster—Semaphore Semaphoridi!"

Christophoridi led the captain and Gabunia to the pier. The captain argued with Gabunia all the way. Gabunia wanted to leave, and the captain protested.

"I never had dealings with silly women," he muttered, and demanded that Gabunia stay till morning. In the end, Gabunia agreed.

The woman was rather bewildered. Two men seized her valises and led her off towards what seemed to be the jetty. The roar of the sea grew louder and more insistent with every step. Christophoridi came along behind, so pleased he had to whistle. He had determined to follow events to their conclusion. There was no conversation to speak of, because the wind from the sea and the gravel crunching underfoot made hearing difficult.

The woman walked as in a dream. She seemed still to be on shipboard. The earth rocked with the rustling of the wind in the acacias.

As in a dream, she entered the little white house, where the copper barometers all indicated "variable," and the wall was hung with steamer posters, under framed pictures of Stalin and Columbus, while a white clipper model with a gilded bowsprit swung just below the ceiling.

A tow-headed sailor in a loose blue suit rose to his feet as she came in, and shook her hand, and then the little girl's. His grip was so hard it made the knuckles crack. The little girl began to cry.



Then the sailor squatted in front of the child. He made a droll face, and began singing raucously, some silly English foxtrot tune, clapping his hands to keep time. He was trying to soothe her tears. And the little girl laughed, though she did not understand.

That broke the general tension. The woman got into conversation with Gabunia. Christophoridi, in search of a pretext for staying on, repaired to the captain's kitchen, where he dug up an old pair of boots and attacked them furiously with his brushes. He brushed until the boots got scorching hot, and stung his fingers when he touched them.

As Christophoridi worked, he listened. From the woman's replies to Gabunia he learned that her name was Elena Sergeyevna Nevskaya, that she was a botanist (Christophoridi knew what a botanist was), and that she was going to work at the subtropical experimental gardens in Poti. After the child had been put to bed, the grownups sat down to tea.

And the things they talked about over their tea were such that Christophoridi lost all his interest in fishing. The captain found him in the kitchen in the morning, surrounded by a ring of worn-out shoes that seemed to be coated with Japanese lacquer. They were shoes the captain had long since been intending to throw away; only now they looked like works of art. Christophoridi did not regret his wasted labour and polish. The talk he had heard that night was worth a good dozen tins of the very best blacking.

After the woman had hung up her hat and raincoat and settled down at the table, Chup said good-naturedly, looking into her tired young face:

"So you've come to stay in our blessed Colchis? Fine! And what might be your specialty?"

"I specialize in tea, but out here I'll be working on everything that grows. Mainly, eucalypts."

"Eucalypts—that's foolishness," said the captain. "Tea, now—that's another matter. I've specialized in tea, so to speak, myself. Hundreds of tons of it I've brought across the seas, in my day. Look!"

The captain pointed to the hanging model.



"Let me introduce you. That's the tea clipper *Begonia*. The world's last clipper. I sailed on it for three years."

Syoma grunted admiration. Nevskaya looked up at the clipper. Gabunia noticed the peaceful calm of her tired eyes, shaded by heavy, reddish-chestnut hair.

Chup was a very talkative man. He considered talk the best form of relaxation, and would often say, to his numerous friends:

"Let's take a rest, and gab a while."

Gabunia was sure Chup would yield to temptation. And Chup did yield.

"I suppose," he said, "you think the old man's lying, and all the clippers disappeared ages ago? True enough, they did. I don't deny it. But one clipper—this very same *Begonia*—went on plying between Ceylon and England right up to the war. It was a tea clipper, and it certainly was a beauty! Every trip, we gave it a new coat of lacquer, and it always glistened as if it had just been washed.

"The captains of the rotten, filthy coalers were always mad at us. They'd signal to us: 'Pick up your train before we soil it, angel face!' 'Tea club lickspittles,' they called us. We were hated in every port. And why? Hold on—I'll be getting to that.

"We freighted tea from Colombo to London. A special brand of tea—the world's most fearful brand, to my way of thinking. 'White Hair,' it was called—Pekoe. You specialize in tea. You'll understand. Tea is supposed to be best when it's had a good long journey. While it's travelling, it gains strength and fragrance and delicacy. They say time has to do with it, and air, and warmth. There was good reason why 'caravan' tea was considered the best, here in Russia, in the old days. It travelled over a year by caravan, from China. And while it was travelling, third grade turned into first. Isn't that true? You see, I know something about it too."

Syoma began to snore, with his head on the table. Chup pulled the sailor's cap down until it almost covered his nose, and said to Gabunia:

"Be a good fellow, take him out to your place and give him a job. He missed his ship, and he doesn't want to go



to England. He's a good sort, only he seems to be dumbish. And untalkative."

"All right. I'll take him. Go on about that clipper!"

"Well, it was just that about tea that kept our clipper sailing. It belonged to the Leslie Tea Company. Most of the Leslie tea was shipped on metal steamers. But let me tell you, tea absorbs odours as fast as blotting paper soaks up ink. On the steamers, it lost its fragrance. It absorbed the smells of iron and coal and skins, of rats and stagnant water—all the junk you can find in the hold. That tea—the steamer tea—was sold to the general public. But for the fanciers, for the gourmands, blast 'em, tea was shipped on a wooden clipper.

"We didn't smell of rats. We smelled of palm wood and jasmine. Honest to God! Why jasmine? Because they put jasmine blossoms, and camellia, and laurel in the tea, to give it fragrance. Our sense of smell was as delicate as a touchy woman's. We left a wake of perfume behind us, and the steamers we met would yell, 'Phew! Give us air! There's Captain Frey again, taking his floating barbershop to London!'

"But that's not all. Company orders were to sail from Colombo to London all the way around Africa, instead of using the Suez Canal. We never hurried. The idea was to keep the tea on its way as long as possible. But they certainly charged money for that tea, when it did arrive! Now you can understand why we were despised in every port.

"We carried the best brands of tea, and one of them was 'White Hair.' Every time I look at Gabunia, here, I remember that tea. Not because of the grey on your temples, Gabunia. That comes from thinking too much. You're only thirty-two, I know.

"Now, how did I come to find out why the 'White Hair' got its name? Listen—it's interesting.

"In Ceylon, once, I missed my ship, just like Syoma here." The captain pulled Syoma's cap still further down over his nose. "What was I to do? Dead broke, and nothing to eat! While I was waiting for the *Begonia* to get back, I took a job as an overseer on Leslie's tea plantations. All the workers were natives, mainly women. And as meek as cab horses."



The sound of brushes in the kitchen stopped. Evidently, Christophoridi was too carried away by the captain's tale to keep up his pretences.

Dawn was breaking. The greenish light turned the sky into a boundless ocean, hung above the sea. Chup glanced through the window.

"Calm," he said. "Beautiful! Well, it was there I learned what colonies are, and tropics. After that, I hated the tropics. It gave me a sour taste even to think of them.

"You wake up at dawn. . . . The air makes you feel younger every minute. Gurgling brooks, and some sort of devilish flowers on the trees, the size of soup plates, and monkeys hanging by their tails, dropping things onto your head. Fertility and wealth! The smells alone could make a man a poet.

"And so, you wake up, and see a great sun shining over the tropical groves. And then you hear the sound of rods on flesh, and women crying, and the overseers' rough voices, and you see the children gnawing coconut husks. And you begin to boil inside, till your head almost splits with anger.

"They say the tropics are paradise. Who says that? Don't believe such fools! The tropics are hell. Nights drowned in tears, that's what the tropics are! Sometimes you see a native's face go grey, and he sets his teeth, and you'd think he'd let fly at the overseer's jaw. Only he can't clench his fist. That's a disease they have out there. 'Rubber fist,' it's called. The heat, and the fever, and the inhuman labour drain every last drop of strength. I could force open the strongest native's fist with my finger and thumb, without even trying. That's the tropics for you!

"Well, I was put to work on a plantation where they grow the 'White Hair' brand of tea. The tips of its leaves are whitish, true enough.

"One day, on that plantation, I came across a grey-haired woman. She was huddled up on the ground, crying. I asked her what was wrong. It turned out her husband was sick, and she couldn't go home to take care of him, for fear they'd drive her out, or beat her. I helped her up, and then I saw how young she was. No older than you. I told her, 'Go home. I'll take the blame.' She kissed my hand. 'Master,' she said,



'you don't know what those bosses do to us! Even the tea turns grey, watching our torment. Even the tea! And that's why we call it "White Hair."'

"There was a grand row, afterwards. I broke one overseer's collarbone."

Chup fell silent.

"But where do I come in, *katso*?" asked Gabunia. "What's the connection between that tea and me?"

"The connection is this: on account of you, I've stopped hating the tropics." Here Chup turned to Nevskaya, and went on, with a nod at Gabunia: "This man is creating Soviet tropics in our parts. That I can understand. The same wealth, the same fertility, only freedom added, and purpose. There's an aim worth working for! Socialist tropics! It'll come down on their tropics like a windlass over the head. Do you get the idea?"

"I met Pakhomov the other day. 'Listen, Chup,' he said to me. 'You don't understand a thing. Yes, we're draining the swamps, and creating a new tropical region in their place. We're planting oranges, lemons, ramie, tea, and all the rest. We're rooting out malaria, and lining the sea coast with health resorts. That's all very well. But that's not the main thing. The main thing is, we're creating Nature anew for a people whose labour is free. We shall make our tropics prosper as those bosses of yours never dreamed they could. We'll prove the power of our epoch here, and it will be far beyond your wildest imaginings.' Good for Pakhomov! He's a rare old man!"

Gabunia stood up. He had to make the noon train to Chaladidi, to get back to his canal.

Morning had come into its own. Stevedores were shouting, windlasses screeching. The bus sounded its horn. A sea gull swept past the windows, screaming hoarsely.

Nevskaya looked up, with a wan smile. Her lids were heavy. She was fighting painfully to keep awake.

"Look here, botanist," said Chup ferociously. "Why not stay right here till you get permanent quarters? It's no sort of life in a hotel, with a child on your hands. I've got two rooms here. I'll clear one out for you. And Christophoridi can take care of the little girl, for the time being."



He played nursemaid to his own sisters when he wasn't much more than a baby himself."

"Are you really in earnest?" asked Nevskaya. "I must admit I'm so tired I can hardly sit up straight."

"We're leaving now. Just make yourself at home, and welcome," said Chup, flushing.

Gabunia and Chup went away, taking Christophoridi with them. Nevskaya went into the other room, where her little girl lay fast asleep, and dropped wearily onto a couch.

Syoma woke up. He yawned, pushed back his cap, and said, in English:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the show goes on!"

He looked around. There was no one in the room, but he could hear the even breathing of the sleeping woman and child. Then he tiptoed to the kitchen, took a brush from the corner, and set about sweeping the floor. Now and then he would balance his brush in the air, or whirl it around his head like a steamer screw, exclaiming softly:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the show goes on!"

## GULIA, THE HUNTER

When man entered the jungle, solitude  
joined him at his fire.

*N. Tikhonov.*

THE GRIM hunter, Gulia, sat beside his fire, talking to his dog. The dog was getting an attack of malaria. It lay shivering, the tip of its tongue caught between its teeth. Its yellow eyes were fixed on its master.

The jungle lay around them. Day was drawing to its close, and the strange hush that precedes the evening made the dog's ears ring. It twitched them nervously. The ringing was like the drone of advancing mosquito swarms.

Impenetrable thickets overhung the lonely shores of Lake Narionali. Here and there a dark hornbeam, or a few curly mulberry trees, had taken root among the alders. The yellowing lianas were studded with long thorns, like roosters' spurs. Evil-smelling ferns grew, luxuriant as nettle, in the deep shadow beneath the trees.



"I beg your pardon," said Gulia to his dog, "but I'm an honest hunter. I'm no embezzling bookkeeper."

The dog wagged its tail.

"May the whole world spit if I don't get even with that cub," Gulia added bodingly. "A ten-ruble fine for a dirty American rat! Ten rubles in a rat's maw! 'You poached,' he said in court. 'You poached on this beast.' He called me by a bad name, 'poacher.' Ugh, friend, and what's a poacher? 'Poaching means hunting forbidden game,' the judge explained. I know myself what poaching means. It means spoiling things, on purpose.\* That Vano, he said I ought to get a hundred-ruble fine and two weeks in jail."

Gulia spat disgustedly.

"Two weeks for a stinking rat with no hair on its tail! Even me, I laughed right out in court. I laughed so loud, the judge looked up and asked militiaman Grisha, 'What's wrong with him? Did you bring him to court drunk?' Then Grisha said, 'He can't stop laughing. He thinks he's in a cabaret, instead of a courtroom.' "

Gulia got up.

"'It's no laughing matter,' the judge said, 'when you've shot a beast from the American river Rio Negro. Do you know how much they're worth? A hundred dollars apiece, or two hundred gold rubles. I'm telling you the real truth, like I'd tell my mother. You're an ignorant man, Gulia.'

"'I beg your pardon,' I told him. 'Of course, I never learned to read. But I'm the best hunter between the Supsa and the Hopi. Which of you can go out to the Nedoard Canal at night, and come back alive? Not a one! Which of you knows what rivers run black, and what rivers run red? Which of you can shoot a wild boar at Horga, or catch a wild cat without getting your eyes scratched out? Not a one! Gulia can pass where the water snake can pass, or the minnow. Think what you're saying!'

"And then Vano had to barge in, and he stuck a dagger right through my heart. 'I see,' he said. 'You're the best hunter between the Supsa and the Hopi where your

\* Gulia confuses two Russian words: *brakonyer* (from the French *braconnier*), which means "poacher," and *brakodyel*, which means "spoiler."—*Trans.*



pocket's concerned. Only I want you to be the best hunter where the Soviet state's concerned.'

"What could I say to such a puppy? 'Hold your tongue, base fool,' I yelled. I jumped up to hit him, but the militiaman grabbed me. He said you're not allowed to fight in court. If you want to fight, go to the bazaar!

"They all yelled and shouted, and they were going to lock me up for a month. Then Gabunia came in, the handsome young engineer, son of old engine-driver Gabunia from Samtredi, and he made such a speech in that court. . . ."

Gulia fell silent. For a long time he meditated, trying to recall Gabunia's wonderful speech. It hovered on the fringe of memory, like a persistent mosquito, but Gulia could not catch it. He sighed, and took up his gun.

"Anyway, he said what he said! 'You ought to use your head,' that's what he said. 'I'm draining the swamps, and pretty soon there won't be any place for those American rats to live, and they'll all die out. So why do you sit in judgment on this poor man, and not on me?' That's what Gabunia said, the young Bolshevik—may he live to be a hundred. 'Why punish,' he said, 'when the Party says, teach? Give him to me. I can make him useful.' And if it hadn't been for Gabunia, I'd be in jail right now, like the thieves that steal in the bazaar. Let's be going, *katso*."

The dog got up and followed its master, swaying. Gulia pulled a neatly folded paper out of his pocket, opened it, and held it up to the light. Had he been literate, he would have read the following:

"Attention, topographer Abashidze. The bearer is Gulia, the hunter. You can find no better guide for the Colchian swamps. Gulia knows the most inaccessible spots. He should be of invaluable assistance in mapping the central swamps and forests. Gabunia, construction chief of the main canal."

Gulia put the note away and strode into the forest. He was heading for the ruins of the Roman fortress. The swamp had half absorbed the crumbling walls, and they were overgrown with moss. It was a good place for wild boar.

What Gulia had said in court was true. Nobody knew the jungle as he did. But he did not know how to express himself. Spending his days and nights in tracking game



and sleeping by smouldering campfires, in floundering through swamps and whistling at prowling jackals, he had forgotten the art of conversation. He talked with animation only when alone with himself or with his dog.

Gulia's wife had died some twenty years past. He had no children. While his wife was alive—that was before the Revolution—he had worked the land. Like everyone else, he would spread river mud over his land for fertilizer, and plant sweet corn in the swamp. And then, when the rivers overflowed their banks, he would row out in his leaky boat to cut the flooded corn, as reed is cut in lakes.

Dry soil was very scarce. Gulia fought his neighbour in the courts for twelve years over a bit of land the size of a small room.

Life dragged on, slow and uneasy. Every year came the dread of new taxes. Every year some of the villagers, and some of the buffaloes, died of the fever. Every year, the lonely village was drenched in icy water that came rushing down from the accursed mountains. And just before the Revolution the whole village died out of the fever. That was nothing unusual. Gulia himself remembered seven villages that had been thus swept by death during his lifetime.

The sole survivors, Gulia and Artem Korkia, tied black rags to the mouldering porches in token of mourning, and went away to Poti.

The village dogs wandered off. Some went wild in the swamps, and others begged in the bazaars of Poti and Senaki. Gulia picked up one of these dogs, hired a gun from the *duhan* keeper, and became a hunter.

He was always away in the swamps, and life passed him by. He grew away from human society, and lost his taste for it. People joined collective farms. An electric power station was built on the Rion. But the swamps lay desolate and airless still, and stagnant water filled every hollow over scores of kilometres.

Then came engineers and workers, with excavators, and Gulia learned that the days of the swamps were numbered. Forests of mandarins and lemons would be planted in their place, and the new land would receive a new name: not Mingrelia, but Colchis.



Who would not mock at the ignorant? Artem Korkia fooled Gulia. "A Colchis," he said, "is a collective farm where the women do all the work, and drive out the men—especially lazy good-for-nothings like you. Ours will be the first Colchis in the Soviet country." Gulia believed what he said, and worried over it. How could one doubt an old man who in his youth had been known to drink half a keg of wine at one go?

When Gulia discovered that he had been duped, he had the impulse to go call Korkia a fool, right to his face; but he did not go, for Korkia was his elder by ten years.

Pushing on towards the fortress, Gulia thought to himself, "Where will I go when the swamps are drained?" Then he recalled Gabunia's note again, and determined by all means to get a wild boar and give it to the young engineer. Blood for blood, injury for injury, service for service—such was Gulia's simple code.

He had been back in the jungle for two days now. Strange things surrounded him, but he paid them no attention. To him, the jungle had lost its mystery.

He knew the muddy, rushing waters of the rivers: the Rion, the Tsiva, the Hopi. They rolled to the sea along high beds, built up in the course of centuries. They flowed at a higher level than the surrounding lowland, and when their water rose (in the Rion alone, it rose more than a hundred and fifty times a year) they would overflow their banks and flood the jungles, transforming the country into a vast, turbid lake.

Gulia sometimes wondered: "How do the rivers come to flow higher than the swamps, as if their beds had been built by man?" Nor would it have helped him to see the crosscut of the country that Gabunia had charted. Here it was clearly shown that the chief rivers of Colchis flowed on high embankments, while the "thalwegs" lay between them—huge lowlands, into which the rivers' superfluous water overflowed.

But after all, is every river as insane as the Rion and the Hopi? Gulia knew dozens of little rivers, flowing almost without current—clear, pensive streams, that barely seemed to move. Dense thickets overhung their banks. When



Gulia drove his boat along these rivers, bright afternoon was sometimes grey as dusk; for the treetops met over the water, forming a heavy tent of foliage. These rivers were not fed by the mountains. They took their water from the jungle, and carried it lazily to the sea.

The engineers called these rivers "parasites," and "malaria victims." Parasites, because they fed on water that was not their own: the overflow from the Rion and the Hopi; malaria victims, because their current was so slow—like the gait of a man whose strength has been sapped by the fever.

The sea blocked the warm water in the swamps. The land was flat as a sheet of paper, and the thickness of a sheet of paper was sufficient measure for its elevation above sea level. The little rivers had not the force to discharge their waters into the sea. The breakers beat them back. And the rivers turned reluctantly aside, flowing along the coast until they found some quiet inlet where the sea would at last accept their waters.

Gulia detested storms at sea, especially at the period of the equinox. The sea would roar so furiously that he could hear it even in the jungle. It would seem on the very point of breaking over the coast and launching its dark waves upon the alder forests, smashing and felling the trees. And the rain would pour without letup over this drenched, unhappy land.

Storms ended in flood. The breakers would cast up mountains of sand at the river mouths. And the little rivers, unable to break through, would stop in their course and flood the land.

Such a flood would continue until the water rose higher than the sand barriers the breakers had cast up, until it washed the sand away and escaped to the sea, blanketing the waves with mud and slime for many a league from shore.

After a flood, the country would look as though it had been daubed with some grey ointment. Trees, lianas, and buildings would be coated with viscous slime. But this would soon dry and drop off.

Gulia had his own ideas about flood prevention. The mouths of the rivers, he knew, were so thickly overgrown with alder that the current was greatly weakened. The trees should be cut, to give the water way; but nobody ever thought



of that, and Gulia said nothing. Nobody asked him. Nobody ever asked him anything. Such foolish people!

Gulia sighed. Gabunia was the only one who had ever asked him anything. Gabunia had asked, that day in the courtroom, whether Gulia could guide a group of workers through the swamps. Of course he could! And then Gabunia had written the note.

Once more the thought of the courtroom brought the angry blood to Gulia's cheeks. He would have to get even with that puppy, Vano!

Evening had fallen when Gulia came out at the ruins of the Roman fortress. The low walls, built of huge blocks of stone, had sunk deep into the earth. Within them lay a little bog, overgrown with rushes and yellow flag.

Gulia built a fire, and supped on a dirty hunk of cheese that he took from his bag. Bats flew back and forth, back and forth overhead, in measured sweeps, as though suspended by invisible threads. The dog lay on its side. Now and then it would lift its head sharply, snapping at the fluttering bats as though they were flies.

Dark night spread through the jungle, beneath a sea of stars. The whine of the mosquitoes died. Some creature sighed and gurgled in the swamps. The last faint glow faded over the distant mountains.

The fire smoked and crackled. The dog slept, its lax skin twitching. Gulia sang to make the night more cheerful. At dawn he must visit the wild boar at their watering place.

Suddenly the song broke off. Gulia reached slowly for his gun, and poked his dog. For the first time in all his years of wandering through the jungle, he was afraid. A cold sweat broke out on his brown cheeks. His hands shook.

His eyes were fixed on the little bog inside the fortress. Among the thickets of flag, barely visible in the starlight, he saw a human arm and hand.

The dog growled. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Gulia took aim and fired. A finger disappeared from the hand. The dog sprang into the bog, and returned with the finger in its mouth. It laid the trophy at Gulia's feet. The finger was large and white, and delicately shaped as only



a woman's can be. Gulia touched it. It was made of stone.

Then Gulia went into the bog. For a long time he stood looking down at the strange apparition. A liana shoot entwined the wrist, like a dark, taut vein. Gulia took the hand in his. He encountered the coldness of marble.

Squatting, he dug into the soil with his knife. A woman's face appeared: straight nose, and parted lips. He lit a match. Mould lay thick on the heavy braids twined around the stone woman's head.

Gulia wet a bit of rag in the bog and rubbed the dirt from the statue's head and shoulders.

The darkness had thickened. Gulia brought a brand from his fire to light up the statue. The radiant countenance of a Roman goddess met his gaze, staring at him through rounded marble eyeballs. The fire lent it life. The marble woman smiled.

Gulia sprang to his feet and cursed. He cursed the jungle and the statue, the nutria and Vano Akhmetelli. Fate was mocking at him. The jungle was flouting the old hunter. A ten-ruble fine for the nutria, and insults from a raw cub in court, and a stone woman instead of wild boar.

The devil only knew what those city people might take into their heads! What if they dragged him to court again, for the finger shot off the statue? Gulia had been poaching again, they would say. That it was he, Gulia, who had done this thing, of course, no one could doubt. No other Mingrelian would venture out to the ruined fortress.

Gulia fingered the bullet groove on the marble hand. He was hot and sweating with anger. Collecting dry branches, he heaped them furiously onto the statue, until it was hidden from sight.

At daybreak it began to rain. Gulia's fire hissed and spluttered. His eyes smarted with the acrid smoke.

Gulia got up and spat. He plodded towards the Rion. Rain-wetted, his felt hat and woollen shirt smelled of dog. His legs ached with the dampness.

There were no boar. It looked as if that devil's brood of excavators had driven off all the game.



The forest was still. It seemed to Gulia that the trees all turned their heads, peering after him anxiously. As always, the stinging rain came obliquely from the sea. It lashed at Gulia's face, and trickled down his chest and back. An attack of malaria was beginning.

Gulia came out on the bank of the Rion. As a thousand years before, the accursed river rolled its muddy waters to the sea. Gulia drank of the Rion's water, and spat. Sand gritted on his teeth. The water was tart and sour, and did not quench his thirst.

The river was swollen, rushing seaward at a level with its banks. The smaller islands seemed to follow it. Gulia noticed one islet on which he had spent a night, a month before. It had shifted downstream about a hundred paces.

Moaning and shivering, he crept into the bushes where his boat was hidden.

He did not look back. Only when embarked did he turn to shake his dark, scrawny fist at the jungle. He could no longer curse. His blue lips twitched, and sobs rose from his throat in place of words. It was then that Gulia realized why the trees had turned to look after him. This had been their sad farewell to the last of the hunters, as he abandoned the jungle forever.

But perhaps the trees had not turned at all, and it was just delusion—delirium? What did it matter? Gulia shrugged impatiently.

Two hours later, topographer Abashidze found a hunter lying on the ground near his house at Chaladidi village. The hunter was writhing in the grip of a frightful attack of fever. A lean dog stood licking his cheeks. Abashidze drove the dog away and bent over its master. Groaning, the hunter pulled a note from his pocket and handed it to Abashidze.

"All right, Gulia," said Abashidze, when he had read the note. "We'll make a topographer of you. Only now you'd better come in and go to bed."

Gulia tried to smile, but his lips twisted into a grimace of pain. He staggered to his feet and followed Abashidze into a wooden house, where all the walls were hung with blue maps.



PALEOSTOM lay on the outskirts of the city. It was a lake of green water, blanketed always, close over the surface, with a thin layer of mist. Dark plane trees towered above it, and sea gulls dipped and screamed the whole day long.

Nevskaya had engaged a boat to take her to the colmatage workings, across Paleostom.

As the boat skirted the workings, she caught the odour of river slime, and the sound of water gurgling through sluices. Behind low dirt embankments, overgrown with willows, the new soil of Colchis was coming slowly into being.

Having made time, at last, for this long-planned outing, Nevskaya came determined to learn from Pakhomov what was really meant by colmatage.

She asked the boatmen to bring up, and sprang lightly to the top of the embankment. The sultry air smelled of sun-warmed sedge.

She soon caught sight of Pakhomov, and walked towards him. The old man stood beside a nearby sluice gate, frowning down at the water that poured through the wooden duct. He was a little man, with a shock of white hair, looking a veritable sorcerer.

"You promised a long time ago to tell me about your work," said Nevskaya, smiling shyly.

Pakhomov glanced at her with troubled eyes.

"The water's running clear again," he said unhappily. "It's the devil's own job!"

Nevskaya did not understand. A huge, shallow lake lay before her, side by side with Paleostom. It was walled in by dirt embankments, and thickly overgrown with reeds. Water flowed slowly from this lake, through wooden sluices, into Paleostom. What did it all mean? And why was Pakhomov so upset about the water running clear?

"Don't blame an old man if you get bored, then," Pakhomov grumbled. "You see, there's hardly anyone that really knows about Colchis, even if you take people who've done quite a lot of reading. Some think it's in Greece, and they're simply astounded when they discover it's part of the Soviet



Union. I call that a disgrace. One thing I like about Pushkin is, that he knew such things. Remember the lines: 'From the drear Finnish crags to Colchis' fiery strand?' But let that pass." The old man waved his hand.

"This flat seaside country round about us—this is Colchis. It's very young, only two hundred and fifty thousand years. Before that, there was nothing here but an inlet of the Sarmatian Sea. The rivers bring huge quantities of silt down from the mountains, especially when the snows are melting. The Rion dirties the sea for almost two hundred kilometres out. Every year, it brings down ten billion cubic metres of fertile soil.

"The sea is receding from Poti, almost visibly. Every year moves the coast line out six metres. Do you know the old Turkish fortress, in the city park? It was built by the Sultan Murad, in the sixteenth century. In those days it stood right by the sea. The waves washed against its walls. But now it's a far cry from the coast to the fortress.

"The whole country is swampland. Why? First of all, there's no slant. And then—the everlasting rains, and the river floods.

"The country's as smooth as a plate. Even at the foot of the Guria Mountains, it's only two metres above sea level; and out here at Poti, the elevation's under a metre. If you get down to it, we're living on the water.

"It's the swamps that cause the terrible monotony of plant life. Look for yourself: alder, alder, and alder again—the devil take it all! And a little hornbeam and beech. If it weren't for the mountains at the horizon, there'd be no way of telling Colchis from the swamps around Pinsk. Why, there are swamps here where the sundew grows. Yes, indeed, the very same sundew that lives in the Arctic tundra. And they talk about tropics!

"Why should the plant life be so poor? You're a botanist. You know better than I do that trees have to have at least a metre of dry soil. And where's it to come from, this metre of dry soil, when the whole country's soaking wet? So nothing grows but swamp junk.

"Colchis has a climate like southern Japan, or Sumatra. Plenty of warmth. And yet it's a malarial desert, in the



full sense of that term. Something like the tropical penal colony at New Caledonia. If it weren't for the swamps, we could beat Java and Ceylon, for all their fertility and wealth. Well, then, the swamps have to be drained.

"Splendid! That's just what we're doing. Near the mountains—at Chaladidi, for instance, where Gabunia's working—there's a little slant, and the swamps can be drained by ordinary canals. There the rivers can be kept in bounds by throwing up dirt embankments. That's all in the primers. But it can only be done in Gabunia's section. Here, it's impossible. There's no slope to speak of, and canals won't drain anything but the top layer of the soil—a useless twenty centimetres or so. In other words, we've got to find some other way of drainage. What way? Why, colmatage."

Pakhomov paused to roll a cigarette, glancing sideways at Nevskaya.

It was very pleasant here, on the bank of Paleostom. The mist and the sun created a landscape of silvery, transparent beauty. The wind blew in Nevskaya's face in swift light gusts, like a mischievous child.

"What's colmatage?" Pakhomov continued. "It's the drainage of swamps by flooding them with water from muddy rivers. A sort of technical paradox. Colmatage drains the swamps, and at the same time it builds up a thick layer of new, fertile soil. Here's an example for you. We threw up embankments around this swamp, and dug canals to it from the Rion. We kept the sluices closed till the water in the Rion was at its muddiest—regular liquid clay. Then we opened the sluices and flooded the swamp with water from the Rion. And on the opposite side we built another row of sluices, so we could let the water out into Paleostom when the mud had settled. Simple, isn't it? The mud settles, and we let the clear water go. Then we flood the swamp with muddy water again, and so on and on. That's all there is to it. The soil keeps growing, at almost no cost. And without this new soil, there can't be any question of subtropics here. There's nothing but sphagnum and peat under the water in the swamps, and that won't grow anything but alder. Colmatage makes wonderful soil. The mud is magnificent.



Stick a broken fig branch in it, and in four months it will yield fruit.

"The Rion carries twice as much silt as the Nile. The Nile was always considered the world's muddiest river. It carries a kilogram and a half of silt in every cubic metre of water. The Rion carries three! The land that was flooded by the Nile nourished a mighty civilization. But the wealth of plant life we're going to have in Colchis is something the Egyptians never dreamed of. There's twice as much phosphorus and nitrogen in our silt as in theirs.

"Well, that's about all. There's nothing more to tell. In five years, we've built up a layer of soil a metre and a half thick. It will be used for growing oranges and lemons."

"Well, then," said Nevskaya, "I don't understand why the clear water should upset you. Isn't that as it should be? It means all the mud has settled."

"That's just what's wrong about it," returned Pakhomov. "The current should be stronger, so only the bigger particles will settle, and the finer stuff run off into Paleostom. Fine silt is bad. It makes the soil heavy."

Confined though it was to bare essentials, Pakhomov's explanation of colmatage made the world seem to Nevskaya so full of interest and wonder that she almost wished she might halt time in its course.

Nevskaya was a botanist, and had trained herself to mental discipline; but hers was a nature inclined to stirring generalizations. Colmatage she perceived not simply as a new method of draining swamps, but as a matter of far greater significance: as man's complete power over Nature; as the creation of a new face for the land.

She smiled to Pakhomov. Her voice, as she called to the boatmen, rang out distinct and clear; yet it did not mar the hush of the warm lakes around her. When she fell silent, she could hear the drone of bees.

"Give me a lift to town," said Pakhomov. "I ought to be getting home."

They had a long walk through the outskirts of Poti. The streets here were paved with pebbles from the seashore, and shaggy pigs wandered about, with forked sticks tied



around their necks to prevent them from pushing through fences and ravaging vegetable gardens.

Somebody called to them. It was Kahiani. He sat on the porch of one of the wooden houses, working over an array of blueprints. His mother was busy in the vegetable garden.

"Hold on, comrades!" cried Kahiani. "Can't you stop a minute? I heard the most beautiful idiocy today. I was riding to the port in old Shaliko's cab, and he said to me: 'Do you know what I think, Comrade Kahiani? Ten years from now, the steamers won't need any beacon to find our port at night. They'll steer by the fragrance of the lemons!' Poetry, poetry, wherever you go. No getting away from it! Even the cabmen are turning into poets. A new Hafiz on every hand! Why don't you come in?"

Nevskaya joined Kahiani's mother in the vegetable garden, and helped her draw a pail of water from the well. The old woman was washing some bunches of huge green leek.

"What beautiful leek!" said Nevskaya, sniffing at the luscious white bulbs. "It must be delicious!"

The old woman smiled, but did not answer. She did not speak Russian well.

From Kahiani's, Nevskaya went to the experimental gardens. It was twilight when she finally set out for home—one of those Poti evenings when lights seem to hang in mid-air, quite apart from their sources. There had been no rain for two days.

The streets were like the shady walks of a park. Lamps glowed white in the wooden houses, set on high piles. Crumpled roses carpeted the pavements. Sullen buffaloes, their heavy horns thrown back, drew squeaky carts over the fading petals.

Blue evening hung over the sea and glittered in the windowpanes. Through the orchards, over dusky street corners and thorny hedges, shone the piercing light of the beacon, like a bright planet caught in black nets of foliage.

Coming up to the house, Nevskaya caught sight of Christophoridi. He was catching bunches of leek that came flying out through the kitchen window, and Yolochka was dragging bunch after bunch to the shed. Chup was in the kitchen, cursing desperately as he flung out the leek.



"Congratulations!" he shouted to Nevskaya. "Now you've got enough leek to last till next year's harvest. Wait! Don't come in! Let me air the place first."

"What's up?"

"What's up, eh? When you live in a country, you ought to know its customs. Did you praise anybody's leek?"

"Why, yes. Kahiani's mother's."

"There you are! Just as I thought!"

It turned out that cabman Shaliko had driven up, about two hours before, and dumped ten huge bunches of leek on the kitchen floor. There had been no one at home but the children. To Christophoridi's queries Shaliko had deigned no reply but:

"Quiet, *bicho*. It's a present from mother Kahiani."

Nevskaya hung her head. Forgetting the old custom which obliges Mingrelians to make a gift of anything that may please a guest, she had been so incautious as to praise this beautiful leek. And here was her punishment!

"This is nothing," said Chup, to console her. "Just an innocent trifle. Sometimes it's much worse. In the tsar's times, Mingrelia belonged to the Dadiani princes. First-class drunkards and ne'er-do-wells. They drank and feasted till they had nothing left to their names. Even the beds were gone. But when guests arrived, they just had to show off. They'd make their guests gifts of horses. Only the horses belonged to the peasants. The Dadianis had no horses left. The peasants would keep their mouths shut, and wait for the guests to leave. They'd catch 'em at the boundary of the Dadianis' land, and take the horses back. And while they were at it they'd beat those guests into ribbons, so they wouldn't be in any hurry to visit the Dadianis again."

They had to put so much leek into their roast lamb for supper that night that they could never have eaten it up, had not Syoma come to their rescue.

Syoma was only in town for a day. He was working under Gabunia, at Chaladidi, running an excavator.

He gave them a spirited demonstration of the excavator's work, whistling, clicking his tongue, and rattling imaginary chains. Yolochka stared at him, fascinated.

That evening they learned that Syoma's real name was



Jim Birling, that he had been born in Scotland, and that he had almost gone down to the bottom of the sea, one day, in the wreck of the steamer *Klondike*.

In proof of this, Syoma pulled down the neck of his jersey and showed three blue marks on his chest, like three huge exclamation points. But how they had come to be there remained a mystery. Syoma fell asleep at the table, as usual, and nobody disturbed him.

## THE FOEHN

CHUP rubbed the bright, hairy leaves between his finger tips—and hastily pulled his hand away. The skin smarted as though he had seared it with red-hot iron. He swung his arm back and forth, and cursed. Damned Japanese nettle!

He thought the pain should pass quickly enough; but it grew worse and worse. It seemed to be creeping into the very bone, seizing his fingers in a merciless iron grip.

Then Chup began to worry. He strode quickly through the gate, out of the plantation. Only now, glancing back over his shoulder, did he notice the faded sign: "Avoid burns! Do not touch leaves with bare hands!"

"Fool woman!" thought the captain, of Nevskaya. "Why didn't she warn me?"

But at once he stopped short, flushing. How could he, an old sailor, use such terms of a woman? Had not he himself asked to come with her to Supsa, on his free day, to visit the plantations of this idiotic tree? Well, then, he had no one but himself to blame. Nobody had forced him to come!

Chup was not only talkative, but inquisitive. Nevskaya had told him of the test plantations of the Japanese varnish tree. The sap of this tree is made into a splendid lacquer. Neither time nor damp can dull its sheen, and fire is powerless to crack its surface. Chup remembered the Japanese boxes he had seen. They were coated with lacquer made from the sap of this tree. It was hard as transparent steel.

Further, he had learned from Nevskaya that this lacquer is indispensable in shipbuilding, to coat all underwater parts. That had caught his interest as a sailor. And so, when Nevskaya



and Lapshin planned their trip to Supsa to visit the plantations of the varnish tree, he had asked them to take him along.

The pain was getting worse. Chup thrust his hand into his pocket and went out onto the road. The dusty Ford stood dreaming in the thin shade of some old acacias. Neither Nevskaya nor Lapshin were anywhere to be seen.

The captain got into the car and sat down to wait. He glanced at the sky, and it did not please him. There was no wind, but the air was growing steadily hotter. A reddish mist hung over the mountains. It looked like soapy water. There had been no rain for four days.

"Hope we don't get a foehn," the captain thought, and sighed.

The devil's own climate, in this country! All year round it rained and poured. All year round it was hot and damp as a Chinese laundry. But once in a while the foehn would begin to blow, and it would seem as though torrid Arabia, land of simooms and deserts, had been transplanted to Colchis.

"Looks like a foehn," said the captain, as Lapshin came up to the car. "We'd better get started."

Lapshin made no reply. Throwing open the hood, he began fussing with the motor.

"Stuck-up devil," thought the captain. The hand in his pocket was growing heavier and heavier, as though the veins had been filled with lead.

"Do you know what the foehn is?" he asked.

"It's a wind," said Lapshin. "Why should an old sea wolf like you get worried over such trifles."

"If you get caught in one, you'll find out soon enough."

Nevskaya came up, and got in beside the captain. Lapshin took his seat at the wheel. He cased his eyes in celluloid, and they were off.

A hot breeze struck Nevskaya's cheeks, and caught at her hair. Vibrant, impatient, the car sped on towards the huge white clouds that blocked the horizon.

The clouds approached with dizzy speed. They stretched and grew, reaching up to the sky like mountains. All at once the car burst into them. It raced on, noiseless now, over a heavy carpet of acacia petals.



The clouds were a forest of ancient acacias. White petals beat against the windshield, and swirled skyward behind the car.

The trees rushed up and past, up and past, like a wild white flurry of snow. There was no air to breathe, only the sweet, heavy fragrance of the blossoms.

"Wonderful!" cried Nevskaya.

Lapshin put on more speed. The petals made it difficult to see. The sun hung dull above the white-crowned trees. It seemed to move together with the car.

Something snapped in the motor. Lapshin stopped the car and ducked under the hood. Nevskaya and the captain got out and sat down on a fallen acacia trunk. For some time they did not speak. The sun blinked at the zenith, its white glare turned to crimson.

"It's a regular Turkish bath," Chup grumbled. "This climate belongs in Asia!"

Nevskaya disagreed. She affirmed that Colchis had a splendid climate, that it was on a par with Australia. Many a spot in the subtropics got less warmth. The summer lasted six months, and plant growth continued all year round. What more did he want? The village of Codor, on the Rion, lay at the European pole of heat.

"You don't say!" returned Chup, in mock amazement. "And to think I never knew!"

"The temperature here is very even," Nevskaya continued severely. "There are no sudden jumps."

"Except for the exceptions."

"What exceptions?"

"The foehn will start blowing in half an hour or so, and then you'll see. I wonder how you're going to protect your subtle plants from winds like that."

"Subtle plants" was the captain's invariable term for all subtropical vegetation.

"We'll plant protective belts of tall trees."

Chup grunted his disbelief.

"If you're so interested in the climate," said Nevskaya, "you ought to have a talk with Lapshin. He's studying the microclimate."

"What on earth is that?" the captain mumbled.



He was not interested in any sort of climate just then, be it normal, or micro, or that of the devil in hell. His hand was smarting as though it had been flayed.

"Ready!" called Lapshin.

"It's very simple," Nevskaya explained, as she and the captain got into the car. "Climate depends on all sorts of trifles. It varies within a radius of a hundred metres. You needn't grunt. It's true. This forest has a climate of its own, and the swamps five kilometres away have one of their own, too—entirely different. The climate in a hollow isn't anything like the climate on the surface outside the hollow. And that's what we call microclimate: the variations in climate over short distances. It's very important, especially for 'subtle' vegetation."

"Interesting," Chup muttered. He pulled his hand out of his pocket. The cloth, pressing against it, made the pain unbearable.

Nevskaya glanced at him, and cried out in alarm.

"What's happened to you?" she demanded. "Look at your hand!"

"I got stung on those nettles."

"What nettles?"

"Those Japanese things of yours."

"What do you mean?" she cried. "Why, there are signs all over, in Georgian and Russian. I didn't think you were such a baby! It's dangerous!"

"Think I'll lose my arm?" The captain was sulky with pain.

Leaning forward, Nevskaya shouted to Lapshin:

"He's burnt his hand on the Japanese tree. We've got to get to town as fast as we can."

Lapshin looked back at her, with a quick flash of his motoring glasses, and stepped on the gas. His shaggy jacket creased heavily across his narrow shoulders.

The car dashed out into the open, leaving the acacias behind. And just then the foehn swept down.

The captain stooped quickly, seeking shelter behind the driver's seat. Nevskaya turned her head back, for the wind gagged mouth and nostrils as though with scorching cotton.



Through a whirlwind of red dust she saw, to remember always, the cruel descent of the foehn upon the acacias. At one swift blow the blossoms were swept from the trees, like vanishing soapsuds—an ocean of fluttering petals, borne upward to an unseeing sky.

The wind advanced with such impetuous force that vacuums seemed to arise in its path. There was nothing to breathe. Hot dust rushed, hissing, to fill the vacuums.

Huge columns of dust raced past, and more, and more. Lapshin could not see the road.

"We'll have to go back to the woods," he shouted, slowing down and turning to his passengers. "It's calmer there."

"We can't go back!" cried Nevskaya. "Don't you dare turn back!"

Lapshin shrugged in submission. Silly woman! Why so much fuss about a burn?

The car could barely make way through the scorching wind. Chup cursed under his breath. The dust blinded him. His hand was swollen and stiff, and his heart thumped heavily—not in his chest, but in that blasted hand.

Chup had been through the foehn before. Fighting down his pain, he turned to Nevskaya.

"The dust will soon stop," he told her. "Don't let it bother you. The temperature's much worse."

Nevskaya did not understand. What did he mean by temperature? She touched his sound hand, thinking he might be feverish. But he shook his head and explained:

"It's not that. I'm all right. Can't you feel the temperature going up?"

Then Nevskaya realized that the wind was growing hotter, steadily hotter. A wild thought flashed through her mind: if this went on much longer, they would all be burnt to ashes. The wind would consume them, as it consumed the foliage on the trees.

Mouths grew parched. Thirst made itself felt. A red murk seethed above at a dizzy height, surging ever and again to the sun. Each new gust of wind flung the sun about at will, like a child's ball. Now it would disappear, now shine again—a blood-red disk above the furious current.

The captain glanced at the sky.



"Sixty metres a second," he muttered dully.

"What's that?" shouted Nevskaya.

"The wind up there—it's racing sixty metres a second. Worse than a typhoon! The foehn will raise the temperature twenty-five degrees before an hour's out."

The dust subsided, and Nevskaya found herself looking out over a strange, new country, illumined as though in the glow of a distant conflagration.

The horizon was veiled in brick-red murk. A yellow light hung over all. Only in the time-faded paintings of the old masters had Nevskaya seen landscapes such as this.

One of the back tires burst. Lapshin stopped the car, and mopped the sweat from his face and neck. Pulling off his jacket, he dropped it to the floor.

"We'll burn up," he said, peevishly slapping the side of the car. Cracked by the heat, the paint came off at his touch. "It won't be a minute before all the tires are gone. They never were any good, anyway."

"How far is it to town?" asked Nevskaya.

"Ten kilometres."

Nevskaya recalled the details of the road. Two kilometres along the coast, with the waves splashing up at the wheels—there was no other road; then the ferry across the river Caparcha; and after that, a full seven kilometres to town.

"Turn down to the sea," she told Lapshin. "We can get into the water. There's no surf, and the wind's blowing off shore. The water will save the tires."

"Well, let me catch my breath," said Lapshin, shrugging.

Nobody spoke. They had stopped near a clump of alders. The foliage was shrivelling, darkening. The fery wind stripped away the leaves and carried them to the sea. The captain moaned. If only he had a drop of water, to moisten his hand!

Nevskaya sat very still, watching the denudation of the alders.

As they came out on the grey sand at the shore, the car skidded violently. Another tire had burst.

Lapshin gritted his teeth, cursing to himself.

He had begun to hate the captain and Nevskaya—to hate



them because they sat idle, while he choked on gasoline fumes and worried over the motor.

He cursed the very name of Colchis, and caught himself in the malicious reflection that the planned subtropics could never materialize, that the first foehn would reduce the lemon groves to dirty ashes.

Turning, Lapshin looked back sullenly at Nevskaya. Her face was pale, her answering look no less resentful than his. A blue spark flashed in her eyes.

"Cat," thought Lapshin. Aloud, he said, with an ill-natured smile:

"We're wasting our efforts."

"Think we won't make it?"

"Of course!"

The red murk swept out over the hot, purple sea. At the horizon it thickened, its colour deepening into black. The sea was deserted.

Not far from the Caparcha, the third tire burst. The car could go no further. They left it behind, pushing on towards the ferry by foot.

Nevskaya was uneasy. Suppose the ferry were on the far bank? The ferrymen would never undertake to bring it over in such a wind.

The foehn had turned the earth to stone. Dark cracks zigzagged across the surface. That morning, on the way to Supsa, the soil had gurgled wetly under the wheels of the car.

Walking at Nevskaya's side, the captain tried to fight down his pain and talk. To comfort her, he lied about his hand, declaring that the pain was less.

And here he made an unexpected discovery: that this was his first glimpse of the real Nevskaya. He had always conceived of women scientists as poor, sickly creatures, sapped by overstudy and quite devoid of femininity. Due, perhaps, to this deep-seated prejudice, he had never had a real talk with Nevskaya, had never even looked at her with interest.

He watched her now in astonished admiration, not unmixed with gratitude. With new eyes, he saw her pale, determined features; her light step, quickened as by vexation; her dark, resentful eyes, and the lock of reddish chestnut hair that fell across her dust-grimed cheek.



The Caparcha, at last. Wind-tossed foam and spray above the water. Nevskaya breathed a deep sigh of relief. The ferry was on the near side. But there was not a soul to be seen.

The captain bathed his hand, and the cool river water brought relief.

"Well, let's be going," said Nevskaya cheerfully, approaching the ferry. "The oars are here."

Lapshin stared at her blankly.

"I never thought," he said calmly, "that the foehn could drive people mad so fast. It isn't usually till the second day that groundless irritation sets in. On the third day, people start picking quarrels, and on the fourth the foehn stops blowing and mental equilibrium is restored. That's what the local people say."

"What do you mean?" Nevskaya demanded stiffly.

"That it's impossible to get across. At best, the ferry will be swept out to sea. At worst, it will go under."

"And what do you propose we do?"

"Wait."

"We can't wait!" she cried. "You know yourself what the consequences may be."

Lapshin shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask the captain," he returned. "He's had more experience in this sort of thing."

Chup looked at the river. The risk, of course, was great.

The water rolled seaward in great brown waves, foaming and roaring. The riverside bushes, prostrate before the wind, lashed the waves with their branches.

Chup forgot his hand. He remembered only the old traditions of the sea, the splendid laws of storm and shipwreck. When a ship is sinking—women and children first! How could he put a woman in danger on account of a burnt hand? The devil with that hand. It would take no harm! And so he said:

"The crossing's dangerous. We'd better wait. My hand's much better now."

"You're lying, Chup!" exclaimed Nevskaya hotly. "Why do you lie? Your hand is blue. We're crossing right away."

"All right then," Chup replied, too taken aback to protest. "We're crossing right away."



Nevskaya turned to Lapshin, with a brief:

"Come on!"

Lapshin did not answer. He drew his arm over his face, and the shirt sleeve came away black.

"He can't row," said Nevskaya, glancing at the captain. "I can hardly manage it alone. Everything depends on you."

"I'm not going," replied Lapshin quietly.

Nevskaya turned white.

"Coward!" she cried, the tears rising to her eyes. "Now I know what you mean when you talk about scientists' 'superior morality.' Let's get going, Chup!"

Lapshin turned and walked slowly away in the direction of the abandoned car. He was actually whistling.

Nevskaya and Chup pushed the heavy boat from shore. After a brief silence, the captain muttered, looking after Lapshin:

"He can go to blazes!"

Nevskaya rowed. Chup rowed too, with one hand, biting his lip to keep from moaning.

The riverbanks whirled before them like a grey merry-go-round. The wind whistled and caught at the oars, trying to pull them free. It carried off Nevskaya's beret, and her reddish hair blew loose, a flaunting pennant.

The waves beat heavily against the low wooden side. With his bad hand, Chup bailed out the water. Nevskaya was soaked to the skin. Every sinew was tensed in superhuman effort.

"Where does she get such strength?" the captain wondered.

He kept a watchful eye on the mouth of the river. It was drawing rapidly nearer. He could see the beating breakers, the seething surface.

"We mustn't get pulled out to sea!"

Nevskaya's head was spinning desperately. She bit her lip until it bled. A gust of wind tore the oar from her hands. The boat rocked. The captain glanced at the bank. The trees were bowing low in terror before a new and still more furious blast.

"We're done for now," the captain muttered.



Nevskaya was blinded by the spray. But she managed, somehow, to rescue her oar, and went on rowing.

Time dragged on endlessly.

Glancing over his shoulder once more, the captain found that the shore was very near. He saw the ferrymen's shanty, on the bank, and two fishermen standing in the river, up to the knee in water. One of the fishermen held a boat hook.

When the hook caught the side of the boat, the captain shouted to Nevskaya:

"We're safe!"

He had forgotten his hand entirely; but once they were safely on shore, the pain returned.

A young fisherman in shorts looked at the captain ironically.

"Well, *katso*," he said. "Gone a little crazy with the wind? You've got the looks of a sailor, but you act like a fool. And a woman with you, too."

"Drop it, friend," said the captain, clapping the fisherman's shoulder with his sound hand. "Come and visit me at the port. *Shashlik* and new wine. We'll drink for the rescue."

The fishermen laughed.

"When the wind drops, ship that fellow over," said the captain, pointing to Lapshin, who was working over the car.

"Sure thing!"

They set out for town, walking along the coast, where the grey dunes sheltered them from the wind.

For some time Nevskaya did not speak. Suddenly, she turned her face away and began to cry. Chup was at a loss. He cursed the foehn, because it brings hysteria. It was blowing with undiminished force.

Again a strange landscape lay before them. The soil was dry and scorched, as though by fire. It occurred to the captain that he had seen just such a louring, slatey sky before an eclipse of the sun.

The orchards of Poti appeared in the distance. The foehn had not affected them. They were protected by tall belts of plane trees.

"Listen," said the captain. "They'll bring him over. What's the harm if he does go hungry a day?"



"Don't be silly, Chup! He can stay there three days, for all I care."

"Then what are you crying about?"

"Because I was scared."

This was more than Chup could understand. He decided to say no more, and held his tongue all the way to the hospital. Then, suddenly, he began to curse again, heaping anathema on the Japanese varnish tree.

## A FOOTBALL GAME

THE BAMBOO at the experimental gardens began to flower. The first signs of bloom robbed Nevskaya of her peace. Bamboo flowers only once; and after it flowers, it dies.

Lapshin remained unperturbed. Since the incident on the Caparcha, he had spoken little with Nevskaya. Behind her back, he smirked disdainfully when her name was mentioned. To his mind, her alarm was childish. The process could not be stopped. The bamboo was doomed. Hence, it was silly to worry about it.

The captain came to the gardens to have a look at the flowering bamboo. His hand was getting better, but it was still encased in bandages. He brought Yolochka and Christophoridi with him.

Entering Nevskaya's bright workroom, in the little wooden house at the gardens, the captain found another visitor—Syoma, come to town to get some spare parts for his excavator. Syoma had brought a note from Gabunia, inviting Nevskaya and Chup to Chaladidi to see the canal.

The windows were wide open. Outdoors, in the dazzling morning light, a fresh, clear breeze ruffled through the trees. Blossoming vines drooped their cold white spray over the window sill.

The breath of damp earth and vegetation, the sweet fragrance of mimosa, reminded Chup of his days in Madagascar with Rozhestvensky's fleet. They brought back the dizzy aroma of fruits in the Eastern bazaars.

Yolochka and Christophoridi ran off to play under the trees. The experimental gardens were a huge, shady orchard,



brimful of wonders. Christophoridi rubbed young lemon leaves between his palms, and sniffed ecstatically.

A thick column of smoke rose to the sky over a bonfire of last year's magnolia leaves.

Christophoridi invented a game. He was a tiger, and Yolochka a huntress. Christophoridi hid among the undergrowth, snarling and snapping at leaves in tigrish fury, crouching in readiness for tremendous springs. He grew so absorbed in play that he forgot the troubles that were bound to follow. His mother would be sure to scold because he earned so little. He'd have to ask Chup for another fifty kopeks, or the old lady would give him no peace.

Christophoridi snarled and snapped, until he almost cried. He had caught at a leaf of the camphor laurel, and his very jaws ached with its bitter pungence.

The sunlight poured through the branches in jets of green, as water runs through the openings in a sluice gate. A medicinal odour of roots rose from the soil. Porcelain rhododendron leaves lay like starfish among the grass. The bamboo rustled its ribbony leaves, and the sound recalled the crystal twitter of tiny birds. The ragged leaves of the bananas squeaked with the effort of the rising sap. The cryptomeria needles smelled like a hundred pine ships smeared with yellow resin.

The eucalypts turned their heavy, sweating leaves edgewise to the sun. Christophoridi avoided the eucalypts. They gave no shade.

Among the Kazanlik roses, Christophoridi caught a fuzzy beetle. The beetle got very angry, shut up in Christophoridi's fist. How loud it buzzed! Christophoridi showed it to Yolochka.

Then, making sure there were no grownups to see, they broke off a little piece of the bark of the cork tree, to make Christophoridi some floats.

The light and shade, the murmuring foliage, the drops of dew that fell on his swarthy arms, the glad sounds of the sea, the clouds rising straight to the zenith like diamond vapour, filled Christophoridi's heart with rapture. He turned cartwheels all the way down the central path, shouting crazily, "Shine 'em right! Shine 'em bright!"—and ended by tumbling into a geranium bed.



After that, Christophoridi's spirits subsided. The crushed geraniums might mean serious trouble. He took Yolochka by the hand and led her towards the office, where voices sounded through the windows.

There was an argument going on inside. The first voice Christophoridi recognized was Lapshin's. Christophoridi did not like Lapshin. His shoes, enormous red-brown oxfords, were torture to shine. Christophoridi just couldn't get hold of the right shade of polish.

"Colchis has nothing in common with the subtropics," Lapshin declared. "The year-round heat is too low for many of the tropical fruits to ripen."

"Nonsense!" said Nevskaya. "The year's total in the subtropics comes to three thousand degrees. In Colchis, it's as much as forty-five hundred. Where's the sense in such cheap scepticism?"

"It's impossible to discuss anything with you. You're rude to everybody."

"I apologized to you after that day on the Caparcha, though I was entirely in the right. Let's not bring it up again."

"Your botany's a Chinese puzzle to me," put in Chup, to turn the conversation.

Nevskaya smiled.

"In vegetable life," she said, "everything is simple. For tropical fruits to ripen, they have to get a definite amount of the sun's heat in the course of the year. At least three thousand degrees. Fluctuations in temperature don't matter so much. You can counteract them by smudging the trees—it's always warmer in the smoke—or by hot water bags, for the more delicate plants. For the winter, you can wrap them in sacking. The main thing is, the year-round total. I can't understand what Lapshin's arguing about. He knows very well we get enough heat, and plenty."

"I'm not arguing. I'm only permitting myself to doubt."

"The professor permits himself," retorted Nevskaya, laughing. Struck by a mischievous idea, she went on: "Well, suppose we make a check. The south of England, for instance, with its fogs and rains. It's far from cold there. The year-round heat totals something like three thousand degrees. What do you say: is there any tropical vegetation there?"



"There isn't, and there can't be," Lapshin replied.

"Here's an English sailor," said Nevskaya, nodding at Syoma. "He won't lie. He doesn't understand what we're arguing about. Let's take him out into the gardens and ask him what trees grow here that he knew in England."

The captain translated. Syoma bared his strong, yellow teeth in a grin. Yes, of course, he had been to the south of England, on the Isle of Wight, and he'd be glad to satisfy "my lady's" request. He wondered how much "my lady" had bet Lapshin.

They went out into the gardens. On the way, Chup sternly impressed it upon Syoma that it was out of place to call people "my lady" in the Soviet Union. Syoma readily agreed. After that, he called Nevskaya "comrade."

The captain looked around in astonishment. It was hard to believe that the recent foehn had worked no harm to all this luxuriant vegetation. But Nevskaya pointed to the belts of eucalypts and plane trees, which had protected the gardens from the scorching wind. Eucalypts do not fear the foehn.

Syoma strode along with his hands in his pockets, whistling carelessly, as if to say that nothing could surprise a sailor.

The tropics! On the island of Trinidad Syoma had thrown lemons and smashed a café window, because they wouldn't let a Negro sailor in. He knew the tropics. He knew everything: the ugly periscopes of submarines, and the taste of corn bread, and bloody fights with the police, and life-or-death football games, and false papers, and strikes, and the "long prayer." The "long prayer" was a block of holystone that weighed half a ton. It was used for scrubbing the decks on sailing ships.

Syoma had never been really surprised in his life until he got to Colchis. Here the captain who worked as port inspector—according to the international traditions of the sea, he should have cursed Syoma sky-high—this captain took Syoma in and fed him for over a week. On the Soviet ships that came into the port of Poti, Syoma saw forecastles that lacked no comfort but fresh flowers. After seven days, he was given a job, and the young engineer, Gabunia, shook his



hand and spoke to him as an equal. The most surprising thing about this country, to Syoma, was the way everyone spoke to him as an equal, even educated ladies.

Syoma walked through the gardens, whistling. He spied a bed of leek, and smiled. That was an old acquaintance. When he reached the blossoming bamboo, he stopped short, spat loudly, and made a strange sound with his tongue, like the crack of a whip.

"Crikey! That grows on the Isle of Wight," he said.

"Ridiculous!" Lapshin protested angrily. "A nice joke you've dragged me into, with this sailor of yours. Is that what you call scientific proof?"

"He's right," said Nevskaya. "There are bamboo groves in the south of England."

Lapshin was furious. First Vano had made him out an ignoramus, and now this woman tried to do the same. If it wasn't nutria, it was bamboo.

"There's nothing to get so angry about, Lapshin," said Nevskaya amicably. "Any good scientist can learn a great deal about his specialty from people he regards as ignorant. You should be more careful."

Lapshin shrugged, and turned back to his microclimate laboratory. Nevskaya returned to her workroom. Syoma left, too. He had to make the train to Chaladidi.

Chup stayed in the gardens with the children. On two weeks' sick leave, he could spend his time as he wished.

Standing beside the bamboo, Chup shook his head. It was clearly doomed. Memories of Japan came back to mind, and Chup told the children about an incident in a little Japanese port where his steamer had put in for a load of rice.

The lookout woke Chup at dawn. Something had happened in the town, he said. He could hear shouts, and women crying. Chup went ashore. It looked like a fire. People were running towards the outskirts of the town. The men shouted curses, and the women clasped their children to their breasts. There was no sign of flame or smoke.

Chup followed the people, and soon found himself in a bamboo wood. Then he saw that the bamboo was flowering. It had begun during the night.



That day Chup learned that bamboo grows from common rootstock, and dies, after blossoming, over huge areas at once. Bamboo, both to the townspeople and to the peasants of the nearby villages, served not only as building material, but also as food; for the Japanese eat the young shoots. The flowering of the bamboo, in Japan, is a great calamity.

"And so you see, kiddies," said Chup, "there's a story to every tree."

At length the captain and his charges set out for home. On their way out of the gardens they dropped in to say goodbye to Nevskaya. She sat at a table covered with little heaps of seed.

"Incidentally," said the captain, "you say that fellow"—this was his name for Lapshin—"that fellow studies the microclimate. And what do you do?"

"I select plants for Colchis. Plants vary, just like human beings. There are cranky plants, and weak ones, sturdy plants, and plants that hate the cold. There are plants that demand lots of water, and others that suffer when it's damp. There are northerners and southerners, greedy plants and plants that yield generous fruit, lean plants and stout ones. When you sailed on long voyages, I'm sure you must have been very careful about picking your crew. It's the same thing here. Types of plants have to be selected like the members of an expedition. A single fool or sniveller is liable to spoil everything. Right now, I'm looking for the best type of eucalypts."

"That's just what I . . ." the captain began; but he did not finish. Loud shouts sounded suddenly in the street, arresting his attention.

Christophoridi darted out of the room. The captain stood listening intently. The shouting continued. Was it anger, or enthusiasm? The captain hurried out.

A football game was on in an empty field just outside the gardens. In accordance with an old Poti custom, one of the teams was made up of bachelors, and the other of married men. In such games, passions always ran high. The bachelors would mock and sneer at their married opponents. The married team would play in sullen silence; but at every possible opportunity—rules or no rules—a married toe would meet up violently with the back of a bachelor knee.



The players had gathered in a knot. Among them, Chup caught sight of Syoma. The sailor, besieged by the married team, was shouting English curses. The bachelors were defending him.

Militiaman Grisha quickly established order, and the discussion proceeded more peacefully.

The trouble had started over nothing. Syoma had stopped to watch the game. Growing enthusiastic, he had joined the bachelors' team, when one of their forwards sprained his ankle, and had scored them three goals. Then the married team had raised a row, and demanded that the whole game be played over. Someone had struck a blow. Someone had called someone a bum.

Chup pushed through the crowd to Syoma, took him by the arm, and led him away. Syoma was hot and grimy. He breathed like a winded horse.

"Mr. Birling," said the captain, furiously polite, "does it strike you that you've missed the only train to Chaladidi? In Soviet Russia people know the difference between the time for work and the time for playing football. I recommended you to Gabunia, and I'm ashamed."

Syoma's neck turned scarlet. He muttered something unintelligible, and turned off into the first side street. Once around the corner he stopped, lit his pipe, and began to think. He decided to set out on foot, in the hope of reaching Chaladidi by morning.

Nevskaya was absorbed in her work over the seeds of the eucalypts. There on her table lay the future of Colchis. Minute kernels, brought from across the seas—repositories of wondrous, almost miraculous, qualities. Fragrance, healing juices, hard and indestructible timber, the beauty of inflorescence, and the bitterness of fading bloom.

Since her arrival in Poti, Nevskaya had read a number of Lapshin's articles on botanical problems. These articles had given her a headache. Their writer had no understanding of essentials. He puttered in a slough of petty detail, with the tedious precision of an apothecary. He had no vision of the future, no understanding of plant life, whereas Nevskaya felt that plants, like people, demanded love and insight.



Lapshin shrank from independent thought, from untrammelled scientific interpretation. He was precise beyond all bounds. He had no imagination. He was that worthless type, now happily dying out—a scientist by trade, not by vocation.

His only good quality, Nevskaya reflected, was his ability to drive a car.

Lapshin's style in writing was long-winded and dull. His manner of speech was duller still: the mincing, emasculated tongue once regarded, among an older generation of scientists, as a mark of superior culture. He looked down upon everyone who had less knowledge than himself, and made it his business to emphasize such people's insignificance at every opportunity that offered.

When Nevskaya had finished his articles, Lapshin asked her what she thought of them. She did not answer at once. The next day, she brought him a volume of Pushkin, and pointed to a line in one of the poet's letters:

"Inspiration is no less essential in geometry than in poetry."

Lapshin made no comment.

Bending over her eucalypt seeds, Nevskaya often thought of the work that might be written about this splendid tree. Who had devoted such study as she to all two hundred species of this "tree of life"? Who was more fitted to describe their multitude of extraordinary qualities? This was a labour of which she had long been dreaming.

Nevskaya regarded the eucalypts as the most valuable of all tropical plants. Small wonder the British called these trees the gem of the forests!

In Colchis, eucalypts became fine, seven-metre trees two years after planting. They grew at an incredible, fantastic rate. Some old trees were as tall as the Cologne cathedral—a dizzy height of a hundred and fifty metres.

In breadth, too, they grew at an unparalleled rate. Nevskaya had recently measured the annual rings on an eucalypt stump. Not one was less than three centimetres thick.

It was almost frightening—this tree's extraordinary vital force, the wealth and scope of the qualities that made it valuable to mankind. A five-year-old eucalypt yielded



more timber than two-hundred-year-old northern firs and spruces.

The timber of the eucalypt is considered indestructible. It does not decay. It is never infected by grubs or borers. Eucalypt piles in sea water are as fresh after thirty years as on the day when they were driven in. The eucalypt railway ties used in Australia last twice and three times as long as ordinary ties. Eucalypt wood is stronger than oak or walnut.

Nevskaya recalled Chup's tales of sailing ships with eucalypt masts. Never a squeak had been heard from such a mast, be it even in the frightful storms that rage between the fortieth and the fiftieth parallels—what sailors call "the roaring forties." They only hummed in the wind, erect as though in a dead calm. No deflection from the vertical, probably, could have been detected by the most delicate of measuring instruments. Yet pine-wood masts often snapped like matchsticks in these storms.

"Moscow paved with eucalypt blocks! How wonderful!"—that was another thought. Didn't the Britishers pave London with this remarkable wood? Eucalypt pavements disinfect.

The leaves of the eucalypts are turned edgewise to the sun. There is no shade in eucalypt groves. This is the best tree for drying swampland. Its heavy, rigid leaves exhale a tremendous amount of moisture. Neither rain nor foehn can harm it, and it will grow on any soil.

The room grew dark. Nevskaya glanced up to see the time. The clock was ticking busily in the hush of this little house, lost in its sea of vegetation. It was only five o'clock. Then why such darkness?

Nevskaya looked out of the window. A grey-blue cloud hung high over the sea. A slow peal of thunder rolled through the breathless air. A breeze began to blow. The dark tropical foliage, thinly coated with glossy wax, rustled uneasily.

"It's going to pour," said a voice outside the window. Just then a tremendous forked flash of lightning issued from the cloud, as though a great golden glass had been shattered into a thousand fragments. Brilliant points of light glittered and died among the lemon trees. To Nevskaya they



seemed clusters of dazzling lemons, such as the world had never seen before.

The breeze looked in at the window, setting the curtains asway, then raced off again through the gardens. There was a new flash of lightning. The thunder rolled, louder and far more threatening than before.

Nevskaya decided to hurry home. The downpour might last all night.

Walking through the wind-swept town, she thought again and once again of that first flash of lightning. It had seemed to show her the future Colchis, bright with a golden, citrus beauty.

At home, Chup told her that rains were approaching. The barometer was falling. But the night brought no downpour. In the morning, Nevskaya set out for Chaladidi, hoping to get back before the rains set in.

## THE BUST OF LENIN

GABUNIA sat in his room, absorbed in a volume of Hippocrates. He was writing a scientific treatise devoted to Colchis, and did a great deal of reading on his subject, both among modern geographers and in the works of the ancients: Strabo, Hippocrates, and Homer.

It was Gabunia's contention that the *Iliad* presents an ideal weather map of the period of the Trojan war. Day by day, with punctilious exactitude, Homer describes the movements of winds and clouds. One modern scientist, indeed, has drawn up a table of atmospheric pressures for those fabulous times, based on Homer's descriptions, which makes it clear that the Achaean ships were scattered by a cyclone passing over the Archipelago.

"The people who live on the Phasis [the Rion]," Gabunia read, "have a hot, swampy country, wooded, and full of dampness. At all seasons there are heavy rains. The people spend their lives in the swamps. In the midst of the waters they build themselves dwellings of dry branches. They traverse their lands in boats hollowed out of tree trunks, following the numerous rivers and canals. They drink tepid, stag-



nant water, made foul by the heat of the sun and replenished by the rains. The winds blow from the south, but there is also an east wind at times: hot, strong, and unpleasant."

". . . Stagnant water, made foul by the heat of the sun," Gabunia repeated, and cursed. How well he knew that water's brackish taste! It was the water, he was convinced, that had given him the fever.

Gabunia got up and threw open the windows. It was very stuffy. A faint scent of vanilla hung in the air. The scent of vanilla always came before heavy rains.

"There's a storm brewing somewhere," thought Gabunia, and turned a page.

Foreman Mikha came in. Mikha's eyes were rolling. He kept jerking at the folds of his shabby Circassian coat. Stepping noiselessly over to the barometer, he tapped the glass with a yellow finger nail. His eyes narrowed mournfully. The mercury was dropping with steady, inexorable persistence.

"It's going to pour. Do you smell it?" said Mikha, with a crooked smile. It was Mikha's habit to smile on all occasions, even when life was at its worst. This habit had earned him a reputation for reckless daring. "When the water comes down from the Shaliko Mountains, we'll all be swept off the face of the earth."

Gabunia did not answer.

"The redheaded Englishman hasn't come back," said Mikha. He glanced at his reflection in the barometer glass, and added, "This fever's turned me as yellow as a canary!"

Gabunia looked up. At the fifth reach, the canal embankments had subsided to a metre below requirements. They must be built up immediately. The men couldn't manage it, of course. The only excavator on that reach lacked an essential part. Syoma had gone to town for the part, and had not returned.

"What can the men do, when they've all got malaria," the foreman mumbled, wiping his sweating forehead.

The air was heavy and suffocating, as in a great steam bath. Such was this country. Mikha spat disgustedly.

"I know," Gabunia replied.



He was thinking hard. Outside his windows, the forest stood languishing of heat and miasma. The sky was an airtight leaden dome.

Like a heavy sigh, came the faint roll of distant thunder.

"Let me see." With flying pencil, Gabunia began to figure on a page of Hippocrates. "In two hours, the rain should start. In three hours, the water will come down the mountains. Before three hours are up we've got to make that part for the excavator in our camp workshop. Only what are we going to make it of, the devil take it all? Eh? We need some bronze."

Gabunia felt an attack of malaria coming on. The blood whined in his veins, like shrilling mosquitoes. He wanted to get into bed, and pull the blankets up over his ears, and forget about everything.

The first gust of wind passed over the forest. And again the world was silent as the grave.

"All out to the fifth reach, *katso*," said Gabunia hoarsely. "Every living soul, even the women! And we've got to find a lump of bronze somewhere, in a hurry."

"Ho!" said Mikha, shaking his head. "It's seven versts to Chaladidi station. There's a bronze bell there. Say the word. I'll go. I'll take the bell as easy as pie."

"Don't talk foolishness," Gabunia told him. "Hurry, now! All out to the fifth reach. Get going!"

Mikha disappeared. An instant later, Gabunia heard loud shouts and a hurried clanging of metal. Mikha was beating the rail that served as a gong, yelling at the top of his voice:

"Fifth reach! Fifth reach!"

The Mingrelian workers came running out of their barracks, heading straight for the canal. Their heads were covered with sacking hoods. Lianas caught at their legs, and slit the leather of their boots like razor blades. Their spades clattered against the tree trunks.

Gabunia dropped fuzzy quinine crystals onto his tongue, and washed them down with water. Then he got slowly into his stiff tarpaulin. His face was aflame.

He looked out through the windows. A cloud advancing from the west, like a great black wall, hid the sun from view. Smoke rose from the edges of the cloud. It looked like tufts



of dirty cotton. The forest was hushed. The deathly stillness rang in Gabunia's ears like the pulsing of slow, heavy blood. His temples ached.

"It must be the quinine," he thought, rubbing his forehead to expel the sodden fever thoughts.

"What to do? The workers can't manage it by half. No helpers but Mikha. Abashidze's gone off with Gulia and some workers to explore the swamp along the Nedoard canal. If they get caught in the rain, they're done for."

Only two left: he and Mikha. Mikha was a coward. He was thought a hero, because of a war-time episode, when he had fired a rusty "Smith and Wesson" at the German warship *Goeben*. The *Goeben* steamed into the harbour and opened fire on the town from its big guns. Panic began in the bazaar, where Mikha was selling tobacco at the time. Mikha pulled out his revolver and fired seven shots at the armoured cruiser. His bullets could not even reach the ship, which was standing at a cable's length from shore. Mikha was simply crazy with fear. He thought he was defending himself.

By some fluke of chance, it was right after Mikha's shots that the cruiser ceased fire and put out to sea. From that day on, all Poti regarded Mikha as a hero. But Gabunia knew that Mikha was an arrant coward, and not to be depended on. He had only offered to steal the station bell as an excuse for getting out of the forest onto higher ground. The station would not be flooded.

And that redheaded Englishman must have got drunk in town, and got stuck somewhere with the new part for the excavator.

"And here I stand, wasting time!" Gabunia started. It seemed to him that an hour must have passed in inactivity. Actually, his thoughts had occupied no more than a minute or two.

"The workshop, first of all. Where can I find some bronze?"

Hot pain shot through Gabunia's leg bones, and sent a shudder up his spine. He staggered out to the porch.

He glanced to the west. Impenetrable murk hung above the forest. The trees were pale with fear. The alder leaves had lost their colour. Far in the distance, the earth heaved and groaned. An ominous rumbling approached, as if the oceans



were marching on Colchis. A wild flash of lightning stabbed the swamps.

Gabunia's teeth were chattering. His head began to shake. An icy cold crept slowly, slowly to his brain. The chills! It was this he feared worst of all.

Darkness was falling rapidly, but not a single lamp shone in the barracks. The workers were all at the canal.

Gabunia set out for the workshop. Somebody called his name. He looked around. The darkness was thickening. The wind had sprung up again, driving before it flocks of grey clouds and dry leaves.

Gabunia pressed his hands to his head, forcibly suppressing its tremor. He peered into the murk, and breathed a sigh of relief. It was Nevskaya. Her boots were slashed by lianas, her waterproof torn. She was breathing heavily.

"I was afraid I wouldn't make it from the station," she said. Then, with a nod at the advancing cloud: "I just can't look at it. Brings my heart up to my throat."

Gabunia smiled weakly.

"You'd better go to my place," he told her. "That barrack over there, with the aerial."

"You've got the fever," said Nevskaya. "Why isn't there anybody around?"

"They're all at the canal. I'm afraid the embankments may go. The excavator's out of order. That idiot Syoma got stuck in town with a part we need. I'll be back in a minute. You picked a bad time to come."

Gabunia noticed the sudden stiffening of Nevskaya's lips. He realized that he had hurt her feelings. How untimely and foolish!

"Go straight inside," he told her, almost shouting. "Wait for me there. I'll be right back."

Nevskaya turned away. Her brows were knit, and her lips trembled. Did that lanky youngster think she couldn't work in time of danger, just as well as anyone? Ridiculous Caucasian chivalry!

She stopped beside the barrack to look at the canal—a broad ribbon cutting through the virgin forest, fifty kilometres long. The water reflected a heavy sky, banked high with clouds.



A bird flew past, with a wailing cry. It flew so low that its wing brushed Nevskaya's shoulder. The bird was hurrying to the mountains, seeking safety from the storm.

Nevskaya went indoors. A spirit lamp was burning in Gabunia's room, spreading a bluish light. Nevskaya looked around. Books, barometers, heavy swamp boots, maps. A small bust of Lenin, on a rough wooden shelf.

A window banged to, then swung open again. The forest swayed and murmured. The wind blew over the treetops, pressing them to the earth.

Gabunia came in. A nervous tic distorted his features. His cheeks were ashen grey. His eyes glittered.

"Listen," he said. His speech was rapid and indistinct. "Only a hundred Mingrelian workers. . . . Yes, only a hundred workers, and you and me, to save all this section of Colchis from flood. Not another soul . . . in tens of kilometres . . . even more. . . . The excavator's out of order. . . . All we have is our hands. There isn't any bronze. The sailor can't get here now. It'll start to pour in ten minutes. Can you hold out?"

"If you didn't have the fever, you wouldn't ask such questions," returned Nevskaya mildly. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Everything will turn out all right."

Gabunia laughed sourly.

"Nothing to be afraid of?" he asked. "I must say, I like your confidence! Well, then, let's get going."

There was a flash of lightning. The swift glare caught the bust of Lenin, on its rough wooden shelf. Lenin's eyes were screwed up in the faintest smile. He was looking quizzically at Gabunia.

Gabunia clutched at the edge of his desk. He was faint and dizzy.

"Bronze!" He spoke so low and huskily that Nevskaya heard only a hoarse sigh. "Bronze! What a fool I've been!"

He seized the bust, and laughed aloud. Nevskaya watched him anxiously. She was afraid he had gone mad.

Wind and darkness out of doors, and a light drizzle of rain. The downpour was still delayed.

"It's got to be melted, poured, and turned. That will take more than three hours, but there's nothing else we can



do," said Gabunia slowly, gently fingering the bust. "He'd have done the same, in my place."

"Who'd have done the same?" asked Nevskaya.

Gabunia did not answer, but strode quickly out of the room. He went straight to the workshop, and dropped the bust carefully into the glowing furnace.

The two mechanics, Mingrelians, glanced at Gabunia and turned away. They saw what he had done, but did not say a word. The fire threw a flickering light on their clouded brows.

Gabunia issued brief orders. The part must be prepared and brought to the excavator, come what might.

"Ho!" said the elder of the mechanics, nodding. "We'll take care of it, comrade. Don't you worry."

As though released by the mechanic's words, the rain came rushing down. It poured from the sky in even sheets, with the dull roar of a waterfall. At twenty paces nothing could be seen.

Gabunia turned back to the barrack for Nevskaya, spluttering and choking on the tepid, bitter water. The wet soil was slippery underfoot. Gabunia cursed. It seemed to him that the Black Sea had risen to the skies, to come pouring down on the earth for forty days and forty nights.

Nevskaya sat waiting for Gabunia. The rain drummed on the roof and poured in ink-black torrents down the window-panes.

Nevskaya lit the oil lamp. The telephone rang. A voice cried excitedly in the receiver:

"Qualoni calling! The water's coming down the Shaliko Mountains. It's something fearful. Have you got the fifth reach manned?"

"Yes, yes!" shouted Nevskaya, but there was no reply.

She hung up the receiver. From this moment on, she realized, they were cut off from all the world—Gabunia, his workers, and herself, a tiny handful of humans lost among the swamps and forests. No help could reach them.

The storm raged on, growing steadily wilder. Its voice dropped to an ever lower pitch. Now and again the clouds would flash in grim reflection of lightning, and thunder would roll, stumbling, over the mountain peaks.



It took Gabunia and Nevskaya half an hour to get to the fifth reach.

Pitch darkness. The roar of the storm, and the guttural shouts of the workers. No lanterns. There was a searchlight on the excavator, but the excavator was out of order.

They worked by sense of touch. They wheezed and spat, and shovelled like soldiers entrenching themselves under scathing enemy fire. There was no earth, no air, no sky, no forest—nothing but slippery, primeval chaos.

The canal roared furiously. Gabunia lit his flashlight and directed its ray to a measuring rod stuck into the bed of the canal. The water was rushing past in great, turbid waves. It carried broken trees and uprooted stumps.

"Mikha!" cried Gabunia. "How's it rising?"

"Two centimetres a minute, *katso*," called Mikha, through the darkness. He sent a dim flashlight ray down the side of the canal. The water ran two metres below the top of the embankment.

Gabunia figured rapidly. An hour and a half, and the water here would overflow, wash away the embankments, and pour into the forest, making a dirty lake of all that section of Colchis known as Horga.

If only the rain grew no heavier!

Gabunia was trembling with cold. The water streamed down his tarpaulin coat, and squelched in his boots. He pulled off his cap and threw it away into the mud. Soaking wet, it was only an oppressive weight on his head.

Nevskaya did not know how much time passed before she heard the strange rumbling and hissing in the canal. She flung earth with her spade with the same obdurate fury as the workers around her. The hair falling over her face made it hard to breathe. She brushed it back with a clay-grimed hand. The clay made it stick, and things were easier for a while.

She heard the strained breathing of the workers, the clatter of spades, the heavy impact of wet earth, Mikha's shouts and Gabunia's swift, guttural orders. Sometimes the wind and rain drove straight against her, and she slipped and fell into the liquid mud.

The water gnawed at the embankments, and all the work seemed in vain.



And suddenly, that ominous, seething hiss in the canal. Gabunia turned his light on the measuring rod. The foam-covered water was rising tempestuously.

"It's a boom!" he yelled. "The driftwood's caught!"

He plunged headlong to the wooden boat—sliding, erect, down the clay side of the embankment, as little boys slide down ice hills in the North. Mikha dashed after him, with a few of the workers.

"Axes!" Gabunia shouted.

The Mingrelians worked on, never pausing. The boat tore loose and disappeared into the darkness.

"If only they manage in time! If only they manage," muttered Nevskaya, savagely flinging earth.

The water mounted. A belated flash of lightning cut the murk.

Nevskaya glimpsed the grey oceans pouring down from the skies—the workers, clay-besmeared, ankle-deep in water—the fierce current licking at the embankments. She thought she saw water pouring over the top in several places.

A long roll of thunder passed from the sea to the mountains. It shook up the sky, and the rain grew still heavier. Somewhere far off, the workers sent up a shout. A black shadow ran past, feet squelching loudly in the sticky clay. A young boy working at Nevskaya's side cast down his spade and burst into tears.

"He's gone! It's no use!" a dull voice cried.

Axes sounded, down the canal. Gabunia and his men were breaking up the boom.

"What's up?" shouted Nevskaya.

"Someone fell in," answered a voice in hasty Russian.

"He's gone. Work, girl. No time to talk!"

The men's breathing was heavy as the death rattle. The earth stuck to the spades like glue. Nevskaya's head began to swim.

She heard Gabunia's voice. He had returned. He spoke cheerfully to the workers. He actually joked! The boom was broken, but the water continued to rise.

Gabunia climbed to the top of the embankment. The water flowed twenty centimetres from the rim. Gabunia



listened intently, hoping that the rain might be growing less. But it roared on as before.

Gabunia walked slowly along the embankment, until his foot caught in a slight depression. Water was running through it. Every thought disappeared but one: here, here was the spot where the embankment would give!

"*Habarda!*" shouted Gabunia. "Mikha! Call the men up here! Quick!"

Mikha came running up, and fired a shot into the air—the emergency signal. The workers hurried to Gabunia, lashing out with their spades at the clinging lianas that barred the way.

Gabunia turned his face towards the invisible sea, whence the storm had descended. He clenched his teeth, and shook his fist in the darkness.

"I'll stop you yet, you devil," he said, and laughed. The malaria muddled his brain, and he was near to delirium.

The workers were rapidly filling in the breach. Mikha fired again, a few paces away. He had found a second breach, deeper than the first.

"It's no use," Gabunia muttered, straining to pull his feet free from the sucking clay. He could not walk. He swayed, and crashed down into the liquid mud. He tried to lean on his arms. They slipped and would not hold him. With a last desperate effort, Gabunia tore himself free. But his legs would not obey. He lay flat on the ground and cursed. The fever tossed his limbs as the water in the canal tossed the floating driftwood.

"They've all got malaria. . . . Heroes," he murmured, as his eyes closed. "Mikha didn't let me down."

He heard a third shot. Somobody stumbled against him, and cried out. He thought it was Nevskaya. His breath came in hoarse gulps. His mouth was full of clay and dirty water. Somebody lifted him to a sitting position.

Then he heard desperate yells, and the heavy squelching of many running feet. The embankments had given, he thought indifferently. Now the wet clay would suck him under, and the water would bury him.

He opened his eyes, and started violently. A blinding



white star was moving towards him from the forest, with a clatter and clanging of iron.

The searchlight!

Gabunia staggered to his feet. He did not notice the gentle supporting hands that helped him up. He stared at the star, and wept. He was not ashamed. The malaria, and this insane night, had sapped his strength to the core. Anyway, who could see the tears, when his face was so smeared with clay?

The excavator crawled rapidly towards the fifth reach. Great mounds of clay collected on its treads. It rattled its chains and rumbled like a battery of heavy guns. Its dazzling searchlight blazed far aloft.

There was a hiss of escaping steam, a tremendous roar of exertion.

The workers made way. The gigantic scoop passed swiftly overhead and discharged its heavy load of clay. The breach was stopped.

The workers' ecstatic shouts drowned out the din of the storm.

Gabunia saw uplifted arms, pale faces, streaming tarpaulins. He saw an old Mingrelian reach out trembling hands towards the machine. He saw Syoma—stripped to the waist, his jaws clenched, and a crimson seam cutting across the three dark spots on his chest. Syoma's muscles swelled with effort as he worked the levers. His face was changed beyond recognition: the cheeks pale, the skin stretched taut over bulging jaws, the eyes but narrow slits.

For one brief instant Syoma dropped the levers to wave his hand in greeting. Without the shadow of a smile, he cried in English:

"Hullo! Ladies and gentlemen, the show goes on!"

The workers swung their spades. The work went on with renewed energy.

The Mingrelian mechanic jumped off the excavator and joined Gabunia.

"The Englishman beat us to it," he said. "He came running out of the woods like a mad jackal, and started up the machine. I tell you, *katso*, I don't know how he got here. Half naked, and bleeding all over!"



Gabunia smiled. And suddenly, he heard—silence. He felt the stillness before he realized its cause.

The rain had stopped. An unearthly hush hung over the forest.

Gabunia staggered and lost consciousness.

## THE LAST FLOOD

FROSTED bulbs glowed at the port radio station. A cricket-like chirping issued from the receiver. The operator frowned and twitched his shoulders irritably, transmitting a message from the chief of the port:

“The Rion and Caparcha have overflowed. Their waters have joined and deluged the town. Only the port remains unflooded. The water is rising. It flows almost a metre high in the streets. Send ships and flotage at once to rescue the population.”

Chup shrugged his shoulders. A furious storm was raging outside. Black waves dashed over the jetty, buffeting the Greek steamer that tossed at anchor in the harbour. A pouring rain rattled machine-gun fire on the corrugated iron warehouses.

What ship could hazard the voyage from Batum to Poti? What flotage could the chief of the port have in mind? Even ocean liners would fear to venture out in such a storm.

Chup was out of sorts. He had had a crazy day. Christophoridi had not shown his nose since morning, and Yolochka was all alone. Chup had given her a story book, but he knew very well that she was not reading. She was afraid, and now and then she cried. The captain shivered when he thought of it. How could she help being afraid, with the elements rowdying it right outside the window? The house was barely out of reach of the beating waves.

“Just wait till I get hold of you, you little imp!” thought the captain, recalling Christophoridi’s desertion. He sighed. The devil’s own day! On his way to the radio station, he had come across two snakes. Driven by the flood, the creatures had sought refuge in the port. They hid among the piles of manganese ore.



Chup hated creeping, crawling things of every kind, especially snakes and toads. He could not bear the sight even of pickled lampreys. Next thing, he supposed, the wild boar from the swamps would come galloping into the port!

"Well, how's the chief?" asked the operator, his message dispatched. "Getting nervous?"

"He's all right," Chup replied. "Rampaging."

Chup had a third trouble, too. A felucca loaded with mandarins had smashed up against the breakwater that afternoon. The only person on board, an old Turk, had been promptly rescued.

He was a vicious, cantankerous old fellow, this Turk, and his accident went to his head. He demanded that Chup send a boat out to salvage his mandarins, which were dancing on the waves all over the harbour. He swore he would drag Chup to court for their loss.

The sailors on the Greek steamer tried to catch the mandarins, throwing out pails tied to long ropes. Their ship made Chup think of a floating tavern, it was so filthy, and smelled so of mutton and coffee. Tossed by the waves, it kept tilting up its squalid, scuffed deck.

Chup disliked Greek ships in general, partly because they were dirty, and partly because their sailors had such a passion for inappropriate colour schemes. On a sky-blue smokestack they were liable to slap down a huge scarlet rose, perhaps a whole garland of roses. In any case, those Greek smokestacks were always daubed with some kind of festoonery or other. The only thing lacking was Cupids. They drove Chup wild. Sailors, did they call themselves? Lemonade vendors!

The telephone rang. Chup picked up the receiver. A report from the manganese pier. No light showed from the winking beacon at the end of the jetty, where the waves were leaping over the barrier with feline ease.

Chup pulled on his black uniform coat and strode out of doors. Was there to be no end to his troubles? Suppose some fool ship tried to enter the harbour at night, to get out of the storm? With the beacon dark, it might miss the passage and land on the rocks.

Repairing the light now would be next to impossible.



The first wave would swamp any boat that tried to approach the jetty.

Chup went out to the end of the pier. The beacon was blinking regularly. He watched it for some time. It went out again, and gave no light for more than five minutes. The proper interval between flashes was ten seconds. Obviously, there was something wrong with the mechanism.

Then the light began to flash again, just as it should. And then again it went out. What devil's work was this?

Raising his glass, Chup discovered a human figure crouching on the banistered platform just below the light.

Chup lost his temper in good earnest. The whole port was going to the dogs! What was a human being doing on the beacon? There could be only one explanation. The fellow had gone out to the end of the jetty, and gotten so absorbed in something there ("Wonder what anyone could find so interesting on the jetty, with a storm on," thought Chup) that he had failed to notice the increasing agitation of the sea. When he had turned to go, he had found the waves surging over the jetty behind him and the road to land cut off. And so, for safety, he had climbed the iron stair to the beacon platform. The waves could not reach him there. The figure on the platform was small, a veritable dwarf.

"Who on earth?" Chup muttered. "Does the damn fool want a shipwreck to his credit? It's a disgrace to the port!"

Be that as it might, however, the fellow had to be taken off.

There were only two skiffs left. All the rest had been sent to town to help the population. Chup took one of them and headed for the beacon, with two sailors at the oars. All the way out he cursed the "thrice-deadly Caucasus," with its endless rains and uneasy service.

With great difficulty, the boat was brought up alongside the beacon. The captain, spouting anathema, pulled a shivering, whimpering Christophoridi down from the platform.

"You little scamp! Killing's too good for you! Fishing again?"

Christophoridi shivered and cried. The captain took him home, gave him dry clothes, and poured a stiff dose



of vodka down his throat. Then he ordered the boy to put the kettle on, and left.

Christophoridi was still whimpering. He had spent eight hours on the beacon, eight hours that were to remain one of his life's most fearful memories.

He had gone fishing early in the morning. The scad rose to his bait as never before. The harbour was calm, but behind him the sea was roaring. After a while, the spray began to fly over his head. He scrambled to his feet. And then he saw the waves cascading over the jetty, at the point where it turned sharply in towards the shore. There was no way of escape. Christophoridi was cut off entirely from the world.

He was afraid. He was frightened by the tumult of the waves, by their seething fury. They seemed determined to wreck the jetty and make mud of Christophoridi.

He climbed to the platform of the beacon, where the lamp protected him from the spray. The storm was deafening. He had never known the sea could raise such a furious din.

Leaving Christophoridi with Yolochka, Chup returned to his duties in the port. Soon afterwards, he climbed into a motor launch and set out for town.

The water was rising. The power station was dead, and the town lay in darkness. Only the green lights in the port were shining. They hung over deserted, grass-grown piers, dotted with puddles of salt water.

The launch had to fight its way across the central fairway of the Rion where the water was humped high, as though over the back of some gigantic serpent. Puffing and sputtering, it turned down the inundated streets.

Quiet reigned in the town, despite the flood. Most of the houses stood on piles, so that only a few families had had to be moved from their homes to the cathedral. Dating to the period just before the war, this building had the distinction of being the only cathedral in Europe made of reinforced concrete. In style, it was a copy of the Constantinople St. Sophia.

It was the cattle that had given the greatest trouble. Cows and horses had had to be dragged to the upper floors of the houses—a risky operation, that caused no few tears



on the part of the townswomen and no few curses on that of the sailors sent to their assistance.

The rain grew less. High-wheeled carts floated down the streets. The water lay motionless, carpeted with leaves and petals. Frogs croaked on window sills and fence posts. They dropped into the water like spilt peas when the motor launch came flying through the flooded avenues.

By the "Have a Bite" *duhan*, a fat fish leaped. The captain regretted that he had left Christophoridi behind. What a time the boy could have had, fishing out of his own bedroom window!

The town presented a picture hardly to be believed. The water glittered and played in the glare of the launch headlights. Fish darted to and fro beneath the surface, and roses nodded above. Light waves washed up against dark windowpanes.

Kahiani called to Chup from one of the windows, and asked him to look out for Pakhomov. The old man had rushed off to the colmatage workings as soon as the flood began.

Day was breaking when the launch reached the colmatage district. The workings stood like a fortress, surrounded on all sides by water. The sluice gates were open. The embankments stood only a few centimetres above the flood; but they stood unharmed.

Pakhomov stood near the first sluice gate, with a group of workers. He looked out over the boundless, muddy lake that spread to the very horizon, looked out over the deluged land, and smiled.

"What are you smiling about?" asked Chup. To himself, he thought: "Queer duck! What a time for smiling!"

"The embankments hold," replied Pakhomov. "The workings aren't damaged. But I'm afraid it's hell out at Gabunia's, in Chaladidi. The current there was something fierce."

"Yes, it must be pretty bad," the captain mumbled. Again he shivered at the thought of the two children, all alone at home.

Pakhomov refused to go back to town. He pointed to the sun, rising slowly through a blanket of fog. The land flashed white beneath it, a land transformed into a great lagoon.

"What a sight!" he said. "It's a pity, really. A month from now we'll bring the canal through the dunes, and floods



will vanish forever from the country's chronicles. You're witnessing the last flood. Mind my word!"

"All I can say is, thank goodness," Chup returned. "Cast off, boys!"

Yolochka did not sleep for ever so long. She sat up in her bed, reading the story book Chup had left her. Christophoridi was fast asleep in the kitchen, warm and snug under a blanket and an old coat of the captain's. He snored dreadfully.

Yolochka read a story about a young girl who went to visit an old toy maker. The toy maker's room was so small that the train of the girl's beautiful holiday dress could not get in.

The toy maker was blind. He said to the girl:

"I can tell that you are smiling, and I know that joy awaits you. I wish I were not blind. Then I might look into your happy eyes, and rejoice."

A fog horn shrieked hysterically from the Greek steamer in the harbour. Yolochka shuddered and began to cry. Mummy had been away since yesterday. Chup was gone. And besides, she was so sorry for the poor toy maker. Why did he have to be blind?

Yolochka buried her face in the pillow, and cried and cried. And finally she fell asleep. She dreamed that the sun came into her room, only then it wasn't the sun at all, but a young girl in a glittering dress. And the train of her dress just couldn't fit into the room. It murmured silkily outside the open door. And the girl said, in Mummy's voice:

"I'm so grateful to you, Chup, for taking care of Yolochka. I've never known a man like you!"

The sea lay murmuring beyond the open doors. On the waves danced a shimmering blue-green train, like a peacock feather.

## EVIL FOR EVIL

NOBODY could accuse Vano Akhmetelli, post-graduate student of the Fur Institute, of cowardice or irresolution. When Vano learned that topographer Abashidze and his men had set out to chart the Turkish Nedoard canal, he made up his mind to join them there.



It was around the Nedoard canal, the most dangerous and impassable spot in the jungle, that the nutria should breed best. There were thick growths of rushes there, of white water lilies, and yellow flag—the nutria's best-loved foods.

Vano had never been to the canal. This, he felt, was sheer neglect of duty: not a single word, in all his reports, about the very finest nutria district!

He decided to head for the canal from the direction of the railroad. He was sure he could make it, as the recent foehn had dried the soil.

He left town on foot, equipped with a compass, a gun, and a map of his own making. In his knapsack he carried four days' supply of food.

Just outside the town, he was overtaken by Syoma, the redheaded English sailor. They strode on together for several kilometres, talking mainly with the help of their hands. Then the sailor turned off towards Chaladidi.

Syoma showed Vano some copper engine parts he was carrying. He whistled and clicked his tongue, and did his best to imitate the movements of an excavator. Vano understood. The sailor must be working at Gabunia's, running an excavator.

"He's a queer sort," Vano reflected. "What makes him tramp thirty-five kilometres on foot when there's a train tomorrow morning?"

They parted friends.

Vano took a boat across the Rion, and plunged into the jungle.

The air hung dense and stifling, tangled in the branches of the trees. The swamps exhaled sourish, stupefying odours. The earth rocked underfoot. Tall hornbeams shuddered from root to crown at Vano's footsteps. They frightened him. It seemed as though they must come crashing down.

"You're going to root up all this, and burn it," said Vano, addressing an invisible Gabunia.

When a man finds himself all alone in the forest, he will often talk to himself, or whistle, or sing, or break dry twigs from the trees with a swinging stick. The sounds he makes seem to create a broad defensive belt around him.



In the midst of the swamps, Vano came upon a half-obiterated trail. He followed it. Every now and then his feet would sink deep in mud; but he kept strictly to the rule old hunters had taught him: not one step off the trail! Treacherous quagmires spread their poisonous green on either hand.

Sometimes lianas would catch at Vano's pack. He would have to slip the pack from his shoulders and hack it free with his knife. The crooked liana thorns were too strong for his fingers.

Towards evening Vano reached the bank of the canal. He gave a shrill whistle of pleasure. It was only three kilometres, now, to the point where the canal spread out into a lake. That was where the nutria bred.

Vano decided to rest. The air had grown thick as strong, fresh tea. It had to be pumped into the lungs with painful effort.

Vano dropped his knapsack, then stiffened suddenly to attention. An artillery volley rumbled in the west. He glanced at the sky. There were no clouds.

Another volley, louder than before. Vano's heart began to thump, and he cursed himself for a weak-spirited coward. Quickly, he climbed the nearest alder.

It was no reassuring vista that spread before him when he reached the top. A cloud was piling up, far over the sea, slashed by darting lightning, as black marble is slashed with silvery veins. A cool, fresh, rainy breath reached Vano's nostrils.

Vano climbed down. What was he to do? There was no use turning back. He could never make the nearest village before the rain came down. Gabunia had told him, once, about the ruins of a Roman fortress, somewhere along the Nedoard canal. Perhaps those ruins would offer safety against the flood.

Flood was inevitable. As soon as the downpour reached the mountains, Colchis would be deluged by thousands of muddy torrents.

Vano made up his mind to push ahead, though he had no idea where the fortress might be. Sitting still was impossible. A queer feeling gnawed at the pit of his stomach.



He set out. The path was lit by frequent lightning flashes. The cloud crept slowly, ominously eastward. Now and again the thunder rumbled forth, dull and protracted. Then it would seem as though gigantic tigers roared from hiding in the forest.

Never had Vano felt so helpless before the dread majesty of that which was taking place in the heavens.

He stopped frequently to look up at the cloud, hoping that it might skirt the canal. But each time he realized, with growing alarm, that the cloud was driving straight upon him.

It was a dull, heavy black in colour, dripping tangled shreds of smoke, dust, and rain. At the horizon it thickened into impenetrable night.

Every new flash of lightning sent a shiver down Vano's back. He wished the rain would come. Jackals were laughing and crying in the thickets.

Vano saw a white ball of flame shoot past, sweeping the treetops. It seemed to him that a light smoke rose from the foliage.

Pressing up against an alder trunk, he yelled. A peal of thunder split the sky in two. But Vano heard the sound of his own voice, and it assuaged his fear. He decided to call once more.

He shouted. A faint human voice responded. Vano took it for an echo. He shouted again, and again came a familiar voice in answer. Vano thought he recognized Abashidze.

He strode rapidly down the path, shouting again and again. Each time, the answer sounded nearer.

It was very dark. The rain had not yet begun in earnest. Only now and again a heavy drop would strike against the foliage. Vano whistled and shouted. His fear had vanished.

All at once the answering voice sounded very close, just a few paces ahead. A human figure appeared, vaguely outlined in the darkness. Lighting flashed, and Vano recognized Gulia.

"A-a-ah," said Gulia grimly. "So it's you. The rats' watchman!"



Vano did not answer.

Gulia strode closer.

"Why so quiet?" he went on. "Why don't you say something? In court your tongue tripped like a bird in a cage."

Vano forced himself to speak.

"What do you want?" he asked.

He would have liked to slip the gun from his shoulder, but realized that that might spell his doom.

"The old folk say, evil for evil," returned Gulia hoarsely. "The old folk teach us the right way to live. What do you think about that, youngster?"

Lightning flashed again, and there was a peal of thunder. Vano saw Gulia's keen, gaunt features, and the mocking gleam in his eyes.

"Gulia!" he said, trying to smile. "What do you want of me? Gulia! The engineers have come, and things will be bad for you and me. They'll chop down the forests. You're a hunter. Your livelihood will be gone. And me—all my work will be wasted. I've fussed over those blasted beasts for three whole years. You and I, *katso*, we mustn't quarrel."

Gulia was silent. Vano's heart thumped heavily.

"Why should a wise man pick quarrels with fools?" said Gulia, at last. "You're a fool. I spit at these rotting forests. I'm no hunter now. I'm a working man. The old folk teach us the right way to live. And the young folk, too. Only not your kind. Why are you trembling, *katso*? You wanted to lock me up in jail, but Gabunia gave me work to do. You thought like a fool, and Gabunia thought like a wise man."

Gulia laughed.

"Why are you trembling, *katso*?" he repeated. "You're afraid. I don't want to kill you. Come along."

He turned and strode off, leading the way.

Soon they reached the ruined fortress. Abashidze greeted them joyously.

They spent over twenty-four hours in a tent set up on the fortress walls. The rain poured and poured. Water lay on every side, a boundless sea.

Vano was ready to die of shame. He could not look Gulia in the face. The savage hunter had proved wiser than Vano.



"I spit at these rotting forests," he had said. And he was right.

Vano did not notice the passage of time. Dully indifferent, he left the canal together with Abashidze's group. They headed for the Rion.

It took them all day to get there. At every step, they sank deep in the water-logged soil. The workers had heavy measuring rods to carry. The forest was deserted and still. Not a single bird voice. All living things had left the jungle. Even the jackals' howls had ceased. Only the frogs leaped from underfoot, and fat water snakes swam lazily through the flooded swamps.

"An accursed spot," thought Vano. How could he have fought to preserve this world of swamps, miasma, and rotting forests, this world of fevers and floods, of corn and bitter peat?

The devil with it! One orange was worth a hundred mangy jackals.

## KAHIANI REPORTS

WRITING reports was always hard work to Kahiani. But once he did send in a report, it was always a model of mathematical precision.

"A violent southwest storm," wrote Kahiani, "washed up a huge wall of sand in the mouth of the river Caparcha, three kilometres from Poti, and dammed the river. At the same time a heavy rain began to fall. It continued for over six hours.

"The rivers Rion, Caparcha, Tsiva, and Hopi, not to speak of dozens of minor streams, impetuously overflowed their banks and flooded the entire sea-coast section of Colchis.

"In the city streets the water rose to the level of the second storey. Wild beasts, frightened by the flood, rushed into the town and onto the island where the port is located. The island was not flooded. There were particularly many snakes.

"The flood damaged our drainage projects considerably; but the harm done was less than might have been expected in view of the violence of the rain.



"On the central canal at Chaladidi, the water threatened to wash away the embankments and destroy the results of three years' persistent labour. Thanks to the heroism of the workers and engineer Gabunia, catastrophe was averted.

"The work had to be done by night, and by hand. The only available excavator was out of commission for lack of spare parts. An attempt was made to pour the needed parts at the camp workshop, but this failed for lack of time. The situation was saved by the excavator operator, Jim Birling, an Englishman. By night, through the frightful downpour, he brought the parts from Chaladidi station on foot.

"He had to push through the forest. He was wounded by lianas and lost much blood. In spite of everything, however, he brought his machine out to the threatened reach just in time, and set to work with splendid coolness to repair the breaches in the embankments.

"Engineer Gabunia directed all the work, although he was gripped by an attack of tropical malaria. He caught a severe chill, and is now at the Poti hospital with pneumonia. Efrem Chanturia, a worker, lost his life during the night work.

"The colmatage workings came out with flying colours. Neither sluices nor embankments suffered any damage. Engineer Pakhomov remained at the workings without rest for some twenty-four hours, directing safety measures.

"A group of topographers under Abashidze had set out for the district of the Nedoard canal. For three days they were considered lost. Searching parties could find no trace of them, as it is impossible to reach the canal without experienced guides. Gulia, the only man who knows these swamps, had left together with Abashidze. Yesterday evening the topographers returned to Chaladidi. With them was Vano Akhmetelli, a post-graduate student of the Fur Institute. They had rescued him in the forest.

"Chief botanist Lapshin reports that the plantations suffered little or no damage.

"I am now taking measures to clear away the sand at the mouths of the rivers, which is one of the chief causes of flood."



Kahiani frowned as he wrote the last words. The report seemed to him far too poetic. After some reflection, he crossed out the words "impetuously overflowed their banks" and "frightful downpour." There were no other suspicious turns of speech that he could see.

"Damn it all," said Kahiani. "It's an infectious business—poetry!"

## CONCERNING INSURANCE COMPANIES

GABUNIA'S recovery was slow. For several days he was unconscious. All that remained in his memory were the doctor's whiskers, tickling his chest; a cool hand on his forehead; the captain's husky voice, sunk to a whisper, and an endless procession of stars. The stars kept flying past his windows towards the mountains.

Through his delirium, Gabunia struggled to comprehend. Evidently, the stars were falling in the mountains like rain. Every night they poured down upon Colchis in a deluge like to none ever seen upon earth. In place of water, the land was flooded with white flame. It rose breast-high, and Gabunia's heart was consumed in fire, and the pain was beyond all belief.

"*Habarda!*" Gabunia shouted. "All out to the fifth reach, *katso!*"

The doctor shook his head. Gabunia's ravings were no good sign.

Again, Gabunia thought he was pushing through the jungle with Chup, towards a blue strip that marked the dawn. The cool breeze of daybreak fanned his cheeks and ruffled his hair. He and Chup were looking for Syoma. They could not find him anywhere.

Then Chup dug into his pocket and brought out a Gillette safety-razor blade.

"We won't find him in these parts," he said. "We've got to change the landscape."

He inserted the razor blade into the strip of dawn that shone between earth and sky, and turned it like a key in a lock. The sky swung back with a click, and a new land



appeared. They were no longer in the jungle. They were on the Neva embankment. White night gleamed over the murky water. Bird cherries drooped, shivering, over the iron rail.

Again Chup clicked back the sky, and now they were on a moving steamer, and the water below was gay with reflected lights. A city was piled up on the distant shore. It looked like a heap of old glass. It shone and glittered. Chup whispered in Gabunia's ear that this was Venice, and that here they could buy from smugglers the seeds for an orange the size of a melon, to bring home as a gift to Lapshin.

"The devil take Lapshin," cried Gabunia. He came to himself, and groaned.

He knew that the nightmare would come again and again, before the night was over. It wore him out. He sprang up from his bed to run away from it, and the nurses found it no easy task to press him back to the pillows.

The quinine roared in his ears like the storm. It seemed to him that an unceasing tempest raged over the sea. He stared stupidly at the violet sky outside his windows, trying to understand: how could there be a storm, when his eyes were smarting from the glare of the sun?

After the crisis came a few bad days. Gabunia felt nothing but weariness, a profound and never before experienced weariness, so that even to whisper or to raise his hand involved exhausting effort.

Then a few days when he slept almost all the time.

He was wakened by heavy footsteps. Even before his eyes were open, Gabunia guessed that the person in his room had never had much occasion to walk on tiptoe. One foot would come down, and the floor would creak. A strained silence would follow, broken only by laboured breathing. Then the other foot would be moved, with the same clumsy caution.

Gabunia opened his eyes, and saw Syoma's broad back in the doorway. The sailor was leaving. He balanced painfully on his toes, and the back of his neck was red with effort.

On the table by Gabunia's bed stood a blue tin box of pipe tobacco—Syoma's one and only treasure. Gabunia knew how the sailor valued this tobacco. He smoked it only once a day, contenting himself with ordinary makhorka the rest of the time.



Gabunia did not call to Syoma. A lump had risen to his throat, and he could not speak.

Next day, towards evening, Nevskaya came in. She brought Gabunia a new fruit grown at the experimental gardens. Feijoa, it was called.

Gabunia tried one of the dull, light-green ovals. It tasted of pineapple and wild strawberries.

"It smells of the tropics," he whispered. "Delicious!"

The feijoa smelled of the light summer breeze that blows of a morning at sea, or in a rain-washed orchard.

"This is a rare fruit," said Nevskaya. "It contains a great deal of iodine, and it could be used to treat sclerosis."

She talked absently of one plant and another, watching Gabunia all the time. A piano sounded upstairs, probably in the doctor's rooms. Nevskaya paused to listen.

Gabunia closed his eyes. He knew the melody. It was Lisa's aria, from *The Queen of Spades*:

*"There came a cloud, a thunder cloud. . . ."*

Nevskaya rose quickly, bent for an instant to smooth back Gabunia's damp hair, and left. In the doorway she turned and nodded silently.

Next day there was something of a row in the hospital. Chup and Syoma came to see Gabunia. Something had hurt Syoma's feelings, and the tall sailor seemed on the point of crying. His eyes blinked, and his breath came heavily. He was indignant.

Though Gabunia did not know English very well, he gathered, from Syoma's inarticulate complaints, that the trouble had to do with an insurance company. Most of what Syoma said, however, seemed to be crazy nonsense. And he called Mikha all the bad names in a sailor's lexicon.

Chup translated. It appeared that Syoma had been unable to work for several days after the flood. His chest and arms had been badly torn by lianas when he pushed through the forest to the canal, and these scratches had swollen and begun to fester. Syoma had stayed in town for five days, visiting the clinic for treatment.

On his return to the canal, Mikha told him that he would be paid for those five days out of the insurance fund. Syoma



called Mikha a bandit, and began to swing his fists. This wasn't England, he yelled. If anyone tried to bring the rotten English system here, he'd smash their face for them.

Mikha turned tail and fled. Syoma yelled on. Nobody had the right to insure Jim Birling without his consent. Insurance was a fraud and a cheat.

"He must have been half seas over," Chup added. "Maybe he'd had a pint of vodka."

Syoma understood, and the blood rushed to his face. His life at sea had taught him the meaning of "vodka."

"No, no!" he cried, shaking his head in denial.

He pulled his jersey down and pointed to the three blue spots on his chest.

"That's what I got from your insurance companies," he said. "And it's enough for me. I don't want any more to do with any insurance company in the world."

And Syoma told the story of the spots.

Before the war, Syoma had enrolled as steersman on the steamer *Klondike*, sailing between Liverpool and Newfoundland, where, as every sailor knows, one may always expect storm, fog, and icebergs.

There is a beacon on Newfoundland called Lightwest. From a distance, it looks like a sailing ship, head on. It has a wide base and a squat white tower.

"That beacon was a wonderful place for wrecks," said Syoma. "Captains would head straight for it, and land on the rocks. Then they'd write in their lying logs, 'The accident was caused by fog. The lookout took Lightwest beacon for a sailing vessel.'"

"But that was all a fraud. They all knew perfectly well what Lightwest looked like, and they used it to wreck their ships without getting in trouble. What for, you ask? Why, because it's the custom, out West, to insure a ship that's on the bum, and then freight it with rubbish and take it out and sink it, to get the insurance money."

"The captain of the *Klondike*—we called him Dung Beetle, because his clothes were always filthy. He never brushed his pants in his life, and if anyone told him, he'd say, 'What do you think I am, a nigger, to brush my own pants?' Well, this Dung Beetle landed the ship with a bang on the rocks



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pounds, you'll be the worst fool in the Old World, and the New World too.' I've had enough of it!"

Syoma banged the table for emphasis. Chup stared and guffawed. Even Gabunia laughed, for the first time since the flood.

Chup explained to Syoma at some length the difference between insurance in England and insurance in the Soviet Union. Syoma was greatly embarrassed by his mistake, and left very soon. Chup remained with Gabunia.

Gabunia's illness started the captain off on the subject of malaria, and he rambled on and on.

"Under the tsar, the Poti garrison used to die out to a man of the fever every three years. How do you like that? That's what started the soldiers' songs about the 'deadly Caucasus.' Redhead says"—"Redhead" was Chup's name for the doctor—"Redhead says there's a special sort of fever in these parts. Swamp cachexia, they call it. Half of your Mingrelian workers have it. You know the way Mikha's always complaining. 'No high temperature,' he says, 'and just the same they can hardly walk.' In this cachexia, people's temperature drops below normal. That isn't your trouble. You've got genuine Poti fever. And no wonder! Decay all around you, and damp, and heat. It's like West Africa."

"Have you ever been there?" asked Gabunia.

"Once or twice," the captain replied. "Incidentally, Negroes never get malaria. Malays get it, and all the other peoples in the tropics. Only not the Negroes. It's amazing! I asked Redhead why. He says this parasite that gives you malaria develops inside your body, only it has to have ultraviolet rays to make it grow. But the Negroes' skins are black, and the rays can't get in."

"You're inventing again, Chup," said Gabunia. "I like your tales."

Chup gave him a foxy look.

"Inventing, you say?" he returned. "Ask Redhead, then. I won't take offence, seeing you're too sick to know better!"

"Well, and what comes next?"

"The most interesting of all. During the wars in Mexico, white troops besieged some city—I can't remember its name—and kept up the siege till they all died out of the fever."



Then Negro troops were sent to take over. And they captured the city. Redhead's told me dozens of cases like that."

Chup was silent for a while. Then he went on:

"It seems the quinine settles on the walls of the blood vessels in a sort of thin film, and it takes a long time to dissolve. The quinine keeps out the ultra-violet rays. It cuts them off entirely. The rays can't get in, and the parasites die. That's why quinine's so effective. I had the yellow fever myself, you know."

"Where?"

"Some islands in the Pacific. Believe it or not, but all my memories of those islands are mixed up with quinine. I swallowed quinine by the teaspoonful. I was deaf and half crazy, and I staggered like a drunk. If I ate bananas, the bananas tasted bitter. If I drank water, the water was bitter. My hands were blue. It was almost too much for me to get up from my chair and cross the cabin to my bunk. And the heat was just a fraud, it seemed to me. I knew in my mind the air was hot, but it felt like ice.

"Miasma, perfume, luxuriant growth. . . . Awful places, if you really get down to it. Degeneration. People stagger around with glassy eyes, groaning and shivering.

"Ugh!

"It's a good thing you're cleaning up this damned malaria country, making a new place out of it.

"In the old days, they puttered around with trifles. At the malaria office they'd stick up sheets of glass around the house, and smear them with glue. Then they'd look to see which glass collected the most mosquitoes. If there were more on the north glass, that meant the mosquitoes came from the north. If there were more on the east glass, the mosquitoes came from the east. Then they'd take their tins of kerosene and make off in that direction, and spray the swamps. That's all. Child's play."

Suddenly starting up, the captain exclaimed:

"Well, I've got to be going. I've been talking too much, fool that I am. You need rest and quiet."

Gabunia was sorry to see the captain leave. He would willingly have listened to his talk for hours, and have asked him all sorts of questions about what was going on "out there"—beyond the hospital walls.



## MASTER OF THE SWAMPS

GULIA asked Abashidze for some time off, to go hunting. Abashidze threw him a suspicious look. His finger tips drummed on the edge of his drafting board.

"The jackal can't forget the swamps—is that it?" he asked ironically.

Gulia seemed embarrassed. He crushed and twisted his felt hat.

"For the last time, *katso*," he said. "I'm telling you the truth, as I'd tell you on my deathbed. It's the last time. There's a thing I have to do. Something very important, *katso*."

"What?"

"You'll soon find out."

"Go ahead," said Abashidze. "But see you get back in a couple of days. We're going to survey the swamps along the Hopi."

Gulia stopped off at the camp workshop. His gun hammer needed repair. Squatting beside the mechanic, he watched the file slide back and forth across the silvery metal.

The glittering steel dust danced in a sunbeam that fell through a crack in the wall. Peering through this crack, Gulia saw the fresh earth of the canal embankment, and that heat-weary forest. Thin, shrivelled twigs drooped earthward from discouraged boughs.

"Eh, friend," said the mechanic. "What things we saw here when the water came from the mountains! Engineer Gabunia brought a bust and dropped it in the furnace. He told us to make an engine part out of it."

"A bust?" asked Gulia perplexedly.

"Of Lenin," said the mechanic, his voice dropping to a mysterious whisper. "They say he brought it with him from Leningrad to Tiflis, and then here, and he was awfully sorry to lose it."

"What's a bust?" Gulia asked once more.

"It's like a little monument. They call it a bust."

Gulia shook his head. Yes, indeed, he knew. He had seen busts. He recalled the statue of the Roman woman. After a pause, he asked:



"You say he was very sorry?"

"Very, *katso*."

Gulia took up his gun. He paid the mechanic with a bunch of dry tobacco leaves, and left for the forest.

For two days he wandered among the swamps. On the third day he appeared at the "Have a Bite" *duhan* in Poti, and spent a long time in whispered conference with the *duhan* keeper. He had a sack with him, and there was something heavy in it.

It was a sunny morning, and the *duhan* looked festive. The fresh oils gleamed on Becho's painting, and the blue and yellow tints were reflected in the eyes of Gulia and the *duhan* keeper. This gave their conference an air of foxy merriment.

The *duhan* keeper wheezed and argued. He kept reaching out to feel the sack, and shaking his head. Then he and Gulia dragged the sack out to the shed.

Evening found Gulia at the hostipal. Gabunia had already begun to walk about his room, clutching at walls and furniture for support.

Gulia entered as softly as a cat. His face expressed profound respect. He stopped in the doorway and bowed low to Gabunia. Dark silver gleamed in his bristly, close-cropped hair.

"*Gamarjoba*, comrade," he said to Gabunia, producing a large bundle from the bosom of his jacket. "Accept this gift from a simple man. Eat and be well."

Gabunia undid the heavy bundle. Within the wrappings lay a boar's ham, gleaming with golden fat. It smelled faintly of tar.

"Thanks, friend," said Gabunia, extending a hand to Gulia. "So you haven't dropped hunting yet?"

Gulia stiffened.

"I've dropped it," he replied. "This is my last boar. When you saved me in court, I said to myself: 'The last boar you kill in the swamps will be your gift to engineer Gabunia, son of the old engine driver from Samtredi. He made a man of you.' This is my last boar. Death has come to the swamps, and life has come for humans. And there was another thing I wanted to say. The little statue that you had in your room. You dropped it in the fire. Were you very sorry?"



"Of course, *katso*."

"That's just what the mechanic said. Well, don't you feel bad about it. When you can walk, and you have some free time, we'll go to the swamps for a day, you and me, and I'll show you something worth seeing. The swamps hide it from men. No one has seen it but me."

"What is it?"

"Don't be in such a hurry. You'll see. It's been lying in the swamp a thousand years."

Gulia laughed.

"I was ruler over the swamps," he said, "like Prince Dadiani used to be over Mingrelia. I was master of the swamps. All I found in the swamps was my own. And this thing is mine too. I want to give it to you, because you're so fond of statues."

For all Gabunia's questions, Gulia would say no more about the thing that lay hidden in the swamp. He only shook his head in silence.

Then he returned to the *duhan*. Artem Korkia, Becho, and a few other friends had gathered there that evening to honour foreman Mikha, the bravest man in Poti. The tale of Mikha's heroism during the flood had travelled rapidly from mouth to mouth.

When Gulia entered, Artem Korkia raised his box-tree staff and cried:

"What's this I hear, *katso*? You've sold your hunting dog!"

"And today I sell my gun, old chatterbox," said Gulia, sitting down beside him. "What's the good of a gun to a working man? What he needs is skilful hands."

## THE WHITE FEATHER

HALF a year past, Lapshin and Nevskaya had disagreed as to where the new "White Hair" tea should be planted: on hillsides, or in hollows. Lapshin insisted on planting the tea in hollows, where the winds could not reach it. Nevskaya demanded that it be planted on hillsides. In hollows, she argued, it might suffer from cold.



Test plantations were made both on hillsides and in hollows, and tended with the utmost care. Their relative progress became a matter of public concern.

In the meantime, Lapshin had another disagreement, this time with engineer Gabunia.

Lapshin determined to plant lemon groves on the soil drained by the main canal. Gabunia objected vigorously. To his mind, the soil bordering the canal was better suited for ramie.

Kahiani intervened, and appealed to Moscow. Moscow decided in favour of ramie.

Then Nevskaya remarked that Lapshin would do well to take a post-graduate course. Lapshin took offence, and stopped speaking to Nevskaya. This woman's assurance was beginning to annoy him. He wished he could find some way of hurting her feelings. Opportunity soon offered.

A letter arrived from the Conservatory, inquiring about a variety of reed native to Provence. The Conservatory asked whether this reed did not grow wild in Colchis, and whether its cultivation could not be launched near Poti. Lapshin shrugged his shoulders. What use could the Conservatory have for reed? Across the corner of the letter, in his crabbed hand, he wrote:

"Reply: there is no such reed in Colchis, and never has been."

The letter happened to fall into Nevskaya's hands. She returned it to Lapshin, laying it down on his desk together with a round, dry stalk of the reed in question.

"You're mistaken," she said. "This reed grows wild in Colchis. Here's a sample."

"Yes, but what use is it to the Conservatory?"

"What use? To be made into clarinets, and bassoons, and oboes."

"We have more important business to attend to than toy whistles."

"Isn't music important?"

"Much ado about nothing," said Lapshin. "That's all I have to say about music."

Nevskaya flushed. What barbarity! Yet it came from a participant in the re-creation of Colchis—an undertaking of



a grandeur that might well have inspired Beethoven's greatest symphony!

Late that evening, Lapshin dropped in at the "Have a Bite" *duhan*. This institution had long since become a co-operative restaurant; but the old name still clung.

Lapshin suffered from insomnia. He blamed it on Colchis' steam-bath climate, and on Nevskaya's rudeness, which brought him to a state of what he called "nervous irritation." And so he dropped in at the *duhan* for a drink or two, hoping that wine might induce sleep.

The place was almost empty. The *duhan* keeper dozed, owl-like, behind his counter. Becho's painting gleamed in the dim lamplight.

Lapshin paused to examine it. What an utter muddle! As if rhododendron leaves looked anything like that! Why were artists always revising reality to suit their own tastes, and what good did it do anybody?

Then he noticed Nevskaya and Gabunia, at the other end of the room. Gabunia called to Lapshin, and set a chair for him. Somewhat reluctantly, Lapshin joined them. He felt ill at ease in Nevskaya's company.

To break the silence that had fallen, Lapshin remarked, with a disdainful nod at Becho's painting:

"The more I look at that mess, the angrier I get. Do you call those things lemons? Beer bottles! Or take the leaves. Why, they look like green pottery shards. And there's never been a steamer on the Rion—it's too shallow. And plant life in Colchis won't ever be half so rich in variety as it's painted here. I can't see why artists are allowed to change things around any way the fancy takes them."

Gabunia chuckled. Lapshin turned cold with fury.

"What do you know about it, if I may ask?" he demanded, in a tone that even to his own ears had a repulsive ring. "What do you see in this daub?"

"The future," Gabunia replied. "Incidentally, have you ever read Lenin? And Pisarev?"

"A little."

"Then perhaps you'll recall these passages." Gabunia spoke slowly, almost reluctantly. "Lenin wrote that even



the most elementary of general ideas contains some particle of imagination. He wrote that it would be absurd to deny the place of imagination even in the most precise of sciences. Without imagination, we could never have had colmatage, and eucalypt groves would never grow in Colchis.

"Lenin cited Pisarev. And Pisarev wrote approximately this: 'If man could not anticipate, if he could not contemplate in his mind's eye the completed image of that which he has only just begun to create—in that case, I am utterly at a loss to think what motive could compel him to undertake and carry to completion his extensive and fatiguing labours in the fields of art, science, and practical life.' There—I've got it almost word for word, and I was afraid the malaria had killed my memory. And that's the answer to your question. Becho's picture shows the future of Colchis. When I look at it, I want to live in the country Becho has painted. And I'm going to live there, too."

"Very well," said Lapshin. He was very pale. "That I must admit. But how can you justify the discrepancy between the things that are painted on this wall, and actual reality?"

Nevskaya looked up at him.

"How justify it?" she asked. "Why, by the fact that all creation begins where stark, dull imitation of the world around us ends. And science is no exception. Nature produces, but she doesn't create. Only man creates."

Lapshin did not answer. He failed to grasp Nevskaya's point.

While the argument was at its height, two violinists from the city park had come into the *duhan*. They sat in silence, at an empty table, softly testing the strings of their instruments.

The light sounds pattered through the room like tiny crystal balls.

Nevskaya was somewhat taken aback by Lapshin's silence, and his evident weariness. She feared that her attack had been too sharp.

"Look," she said, with a friendly smile. "You're not very fond of music, are you? But there's an aria I know. That



same one—remember?" This last was to Gabunia. "And I think, if you could hear it now, you'd understand how greatly you've been mistaken."

Approaching the two musicians, Nevskaya asked them to play Lisa's aria, from *The Queen of Spades*: "There came a cloud, a thunder cloud."

Gabunia shifted a bottle of wine to the musicians' table.

They whispered together, then, in a movement full of harmony, lifted their violins. The distressful melody woke the *duhan* keeper. He yawned and rubbed his eyes, and turned to watch the players—just a fat old man, whose whole life had been spent behind a counter. A faint smile transformed his flabby features.

The violins sobbed as though their hearts were rent by their own music. Then, suddenly, the sounds broke off. The *duhan* keeper sighed.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Nevskaya.

"Nothing," replied Lapshin. He rose to go. "I don't think music can interest anyone but lovers. But those it does interest will naturally take an interest in anything connected with it. Reed, for example."

The blood rushed to Nevskaya's cheeks.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Only that you're very sentimental."

"How silly!" said Nevskaya, turning her face away.

There was an awkward silence. Lapshin stalked out, avenged at last. The *duhan* keeper glanced at the door through which Lapshin had passed.

"What an unpleasant sort," he wheezed, scratching his hairy chest.

It was not long before Lapshin enjoyed a second triumph. The "White Hair" tea came up equally well on the hills and in the hollows. There were some, indeed—among them Kahiani—who thought the plantation in the hollows the better of the two. The bushes here were sturdier, and bore more leaves. Nevskaya admitted that she was wrong, and apologized to Lapshin.

Young leaves, still gummy, were gathered from each plantation and sent off to be dried and prepared. They had still to pass the test of taste.



Soon both samples were returned, ready for use. Nevskaya left a handful of each at home.

Chup immediately brewed them both. The very name of the tea brought back the old days, when the sailors on the tea clipper would filch "White Hair" from the hold and brew a greenish beverage, fragrant and delicious.

When Nevskaya got home that night, she found Chup in a state of tremendous excitement. Nevskaya thought Christophoridi must have gotten into mischief again, and decided to intervene in the boy's behalf. But as soon as Chup caught sight of her, he cried:

"You've beat that clothes-horse by a mile! Congratulations! I tasted his tea, and I feel sick. Boiled broom! Try for yourself!"

He poured Nevskaya a cup of tea. True enough, it had a strange, metallic taste.

"That man's trying to disgrace the Soviet subtropics," Chup declared: "Now try this cup. It's yours."

Nevskaya tasted obediently. She encountered a tart flavour of an entirely different order.

"And they're both the same plant," cried Chup. "They're both 'White Hair.'"

What could have caused such a difference in taste and aroma? Evidently, Nevskaya decided, the reason lay in the greater warmth and lesser dampness of the slopes as compared with the hollows, where the cool air settled and lingered.

She had made endless observations, and always she had found a difference in temperature of as much as five degrees between the hillsides and the hollows. During the winter months this difference was particularly marked. The outcome of the tea experiment offered one more proof of the great care that must be exercised in the distribution of tropical plants in Colchis, in view of this sharply differentiated microclimate.

A few days later, the official report came in from Chakva. Lapshin's tea was rated mediocre; Nevskaya's, as the very highest grade. That same day Lapshin applied to Kahiani for his vacation. Kahiani argued heatedly, but Lapshin was persistent. Kahiani shrugged his shoulders. He refused to understand.



It seemed the human race had no brains left at all. What did the man want? Rest? He could rest where he was, without dropping his research. Sunshine? There was enough and plenty in Colchis. The sea was unlimited, and the air was wonderful. Quiet? All you pleased of that, especially where Lapshin lived, on the outskirts of Poti. Even the dogs didn't bark. A regular poem of a country! But Lapshin insisted, and Kahiani yielded. His objections had been chiefly a matter of principle. When Lapshin had gone, Kahiani muttered to himself:

"If a woman got the better of me, I'd bow low and thank her, old engineer that I am. Hurt feelings—fiddlesticks! As if I didn't understand why he wants to leave! Such a delicate soul! Everyone has his pride. But a man should know when to pocket his pride, and when to flaunt it, *katso!*"

## ARTEM KORKIA MAKES A SPEECH

CHRISTOPHORIDI'S brushes flew like mad, shining the shoes of a little Mingrelian Pioneer. The Pioneer's name was Soso.

Soso looked down, and saw his own broad grin and new red tie reflected in the gleaming leather.

Soso's grandfather, Artem Korkia, stood leaning on his staff nearby. He kept a watchful eye on Christophoridi, grumbling all the time because he thought the wily Greek used too little cream. But Christophoridi grunted back contemptuously. The less cream, the brighter the polish. What was he grouching about, the old jackal?

Never before had Artem Korkia experienced such triumph. His grandson, little Soso, had joined the Young Pioneers. This, to Korkia, meant the first step towards becoming such a man as Shalva Gabunia, the engineer.

But that was not all. In the name of the Pioneers, little Soso was to deliver public greetings to the learned folk who were working in Colchis.

"Where do you make your speech, wonderful child?" asked Christophoridi.

Soso would have liked to be indignant. He thought the question hid a sneer. But he was afraid of the bootblack's



hasty temper. He knew there was a sling shot in Christophoridi's pocket. And so he held his tongue.

A crowd gathered around the group. Gulia came up. He was dressed like a sailor, in blue jacket and trousers. The old laundress from Big Island came up, too, and, last of all, militiaman Grisha.

Korkia began to shout. How could he speak of such things quietly?

He shouted about the agricultural display the learned folk were opening in Poti, to show the people new fruits and vegetables and other valuable plants. He shouted about the speech his Soso was going to make at the opening of the display. Such a speech! Its equal was not to be found, no, not even in the *Pravda*!

"It makes me laugh to hear the old man brag," said militiaman Grisha. "He's illiterate. He's never read the *Pravda*!"

Korkia was taken aback, but only for a moment.

"It's a sin to speak like that to an old man," he returned. "I may not know how to read, but this boy of mine can read better than all the militiamen from Poti to Kutais."

An argument boiled up. But Christophoridi got tired of the noise, and beat a tremendous tattoo on his box with a pair of brushes. The shouting stopped. Christophoridi refused to take any money for his work. "Free service for Pioneers," he said carelessly, his heart swelling with pride at his own generosity.

Korkia strode down the street, holding his grandson by the hand. This day, washed crystal clear by recent rain, was his own holiday. It was a new sun rising over his fading life.

Words came to his mind, vague, florid phrases, that it would be well to pronounce at the opening of the display. If opportunity offered, he would pronounce them. He had the right, as the oldest resident of Horga, where the main canal was soon to be completed.

Before the opening, Nevskaya spent all evening and all night at the display.

There was no one in the rooms but Nevskaya and Chup. The captain talked, at first; but Nevskaya's responses lagged.



She was not in the mood for conversation. Noticing this, Chup soon fell silent.

Nevskaya examined the fruits and plants, each in its turn, as though she had never seen them before.

Electric bulbs hung low among the branches, like dazzling June bugs, their glaring light softened and tempered by the foliage.

Nevskaya paused to listen. She seemed to hear a faint whispering of leaves, a crackling of twigs, a murmur of earth drinking in welcome moisture.

She knew all these plants, and loved them. She was familiar with their weaknesses and foibles, and had learned to value their riches, latent or obvious—the precious juices created by these silent beings, somewhere deep down in roots and stalks, in bark, and blossoms, and ovaries.

They were potent and individual, these juices, as good old wine. Medicinal, aromatic, nourishing, preservative, stupefying, sobering, sticky as rubber, thin as water, greasy, thirst-satisfying—to each its own nature.

An intricate and wondrous process of chemical transformation took place within the plant cells. Sun, air, fresh water, Rion mud, and night—yes, night, for plants cannot live without these hours of darkness—created fruits of dizzy fragrance.

Nevskaya moved from plant to plant, and a great world opened up before her. Human history, geography, the material aspects of civilization, all were there to be studied in the quiet trees.

Bamboo and eucalypt; pink batatas, sweet and mealy; a Japanese radish that weighed eight kilograms.

Big orange-yellow globes: the grapefruit, reminiscent in taste of both orange and lemon.

The citrous fruits—lemons, oranges, kumquats, mandarins—contain the mysterious vitamin C. When vitamin C is excluded from the diet, scurvy results. That is the disease of polar expeditions. It sets the sick blood flowing from the gums, and weakens the teeth until they come out painlessly at a touch. The slightest movement is exhausting labour.

Nevskaya was sorry she had chilled Chup into silence. He might have reeled off many a tale of lost explorers, of



the mighty frosts of the polar regions, of scurvy, of Amundsen, Scott, and Ross. And he would be sure to add some fiction of his own!

These plants were true friends of childhood. Was that why the leaves of the Japanese mandarin trees looked so much like childish hands?

Nevskaya stroked the little glistening swellings on the leaves, tender as a baby's palm. This tree is very small, but it bears some four thousand mandarins every year. When it is in blossom, the petals hide the leaves.

Nevskaya bent over the piles of oranges. The coarsest were the Rize type, that the Turks brought over from Trebizond every fall. Feluccas would rock in the harbour, piled high with unripe oranges, and the boatmen would sell them by the sackful. Then there were California's Washington navels, with their sharp, winey tang, and the tiny kumquats, no larger than walnuts.

The lemons lay on a bed of grass: a cold fruit, clad in the yellow tints of dawn. Nevskaya lifted an American limequat. Through its thin, transparent rind she could see the dark seeds at its heart. This fruit withstands the hardest winters.

Nevskaya was confident that the plant life of the subtropics would prosper in Colchis, even through those rare winters when the snow came down. All that was required was a minimum of protective measures. She knew, from old residents, that it was not so much the frost as the weight of the snow that killed the delicate growths.

Snow very seldom falls in Poti. But when it comes, this snow of the subtropics is quite a different thing from that known to the North. It falls in great abundance, and the flakes are very thick and heavy.

Nevskaya glanced at her watch. It was past midnight. She asked Chup not to wait for her, and he went home.

She lingered over the bitter oranges. Their blossoms are the bridal *fleur d'orange*, which goes to make the most delicate of essences, oil of neroli.

She did not touch the huge Japanese persimmons, for this carmine fruit, coated with a pearly dew, begins to spoil at the slightest contact. It is made into sugar and cider.



Beside the persimmons lay the modest loquat, which cures kidney ailments. A Japanese varnish tree stood fenced in with wire screening. And then came samples of the wood of the tulip tree. The vertical strata in this wood do not grow parallel, as in other trees, but join and combine in intricate knots and curves. This makes the wood flexible and firm. It is used in making aeroplane propellers.

Nevskaya moved on to her beloved peaches, of every tint from pink to yellow. They reminded her of downy baby cheeks. The juice of one such peach would fill a tumbler.

Her next visit was to the fibre plants. Here she found the slender, unimpressive Chinese nettle—ramie.

Large plantations of ramie had already been laid out, north of the main canal. They were mowed twice a year, and every hectare planted to this simple nettle yielded eight hundred kilograms of yellowish fibre, glossy and strong as silk.

Here, too, were the sword-like leaves of the dragon tree. The strongest of the stevedores in the port could not tear these leaves in two. They only sweated and cut up their palms in vain.

Again, there was the gift of that old mariner, Captain James Cook—New Zealand flax.

Chup told wonderful tales about Captain Cook. Fine traditions, it will be found, exert a powerful influence in every trade and profession. And the power of the splendid traditions of the sea became particularly manifest in Chup when he spoke of the great mariners—plain men and stern, combining good sense with unflinching courage, modesty with majesty of action.

Chup could talk by the hour of these men and their histories, confirming Nevskaya ever more strongly in her view of him as a treasure-house of fascinating knowledge.

The subject of Cook had come up after the foehn. Recalling Lapshin's conduct, Chup had said to Nevskaya:

"Lapshin's a scientist. I'm just a layman. Captain Cook was considered an ignoramus all his life. Scientists tolerated him as an able navigator and expedition commander, but they put no value at all on his scientific abilities. What could they expect of a man who couldn't express his thoughts in polished language? Cook knew their attitude. He was a



sailor. He never feared typhoons, or ice, or God, or the devil. But he was terribly frightened of scientific men. He stammered when he had to speak to them. Even in his logs, he seldom wrote down what he thought. His ideas seemed to him so clumsy, he was afraid to trust them to paper.

"But now and then, among his notes of winds and clouds, of latitudes and longitudes and ship fumigations, one suddenly comes across some really splendid lines. When Cook was thrusting down into the Antarctic, pushing insanely on through ice and storm—when his crew marvelled at their quiet captain—he wrote in his log that the beauty of these spots filled his soul with wonder and awe."

Nevskaya dwelt long on these thoughts of Cook. How many of the plants she knew were bound up with his name! She glanced across the room at the Australian acacia.

Leaving the fibre plants, Nevskaya passed by the tung trees, source of an excellent oil, to the geranium beds.

She chafed a leaf, and the pungent odour of geranium oil brought memories of summer days in a sleepy provincial town, with potted geraniums behind thin cotton curtains.

In the old days, geraniums were contemptuously termed the flower of the petty bourgeoisie. Actually, they were the flower of the working-class districts—the only guest from sunny climes that deigned to grace the bitter life of the slums. They were cheap, and they grew riotously even in the most airless of holes and cellars. And because of this Nevskaya's love for them was doubled.

She bent to stroke the plants, once so unjustly scorned. The stalks thrust up, arrow-like, crowned with red fans of blossom. And above them stretched the heavy boughs of the cryptomeria, hung with thousands of tiny, globose cones.

The vegetables breathed of damp earth, the dry cigar tobaccos of sweetish dust. Rice and wheat were piled high.

Nevskaya sat down to rest near the camphor laurels. Her head ached with weariness, and the camphor smell was soothing. She reached out to touch the fruits of the Chinese tallow tree. They were thickly coated with a solid vegetable fat, of which the Chinese make excellent soap and candles.

Colchis, Nevskaya knew, could be made the home of some fifteen thousand types of tropical and subtropical veg-



etation. The wealth and variety here on display were to her but a distant hint of the country's future.

Her eyes closed, and she slept, until a light breeze floated in at the open window and set the foliage rustling overhead.

The breeze ruffled Nevskaya's hair, and blew into her eyes. Geranium petals fluttered to the floor.

Nevskaya went out into the street. The damp pavements smelled of the sea. A team of buffaloes plodded past, dragging a high-wheeled cart loaded with radishes. The buffaloes turned mournful blue eyes to Nevskaya. The driver was asleep. Dew dripped from the radishes.

The streets were deserted. There was no one to be seen but Grisha, smoking a cigarette at his corner post. He smiled to Nevskaya, and raised his hand to his cap in salute.

Slowly, the sun began to rise.

Nevskaya made her way to the port, and dived from the breakwater into the sea. Now and then a plaintive murmur rolled from end to end of the jetty, as the sleepy waves broke against the rocks.

The water was very cold, and washed away every vestige of fatigue. While Nevskaya was dressing, the first sunbeams streamed obliquely into the harbour, caressing the quiet waters and the rusty sides of a Greek steamer that bore the strange name, *Zambezos*.

Light wisps of smoke rose over the steamer's deck. Sailors were washing up at the rail. They laughed and jostled, and poured water down one another's necks.

A shoal of scad warily approached a bunch of seaweed. They hung about in the transparent water, then suddenly vanished in a storm of silvery spray. A fierce, pop-eyed crab came out of the seaweed and scuttled off sideways over the rocks.

Nevskaya went into the house and woke Yolochka and Chup. It was time to get ready for the opening ceremony.

The opening was set for noon. It brought many collective farmers into town, from Horga, Supsa, Senaki, and Anaklia. Pakhomov came, and Gabunia, with Mikha.

Kahiani made the opening speech.

"Comrades," said Kahiani, looking out sternly at the assembled people. "There's a little question I would like to ask you. Which of you has had malaria? Would all those



who've had malaria please raise their hands? There! It's had its turn with every one of you. Only the *bicho* here, the little boy in the red tie, has never suffered from that unpleasant disease.

"What is malaria? It's poverty, comrades! Our parts were poverty-stricken because of malaria. You know yourselves how many villages lie waste in the swamplands, abandoned or swept by death.

"Yet Colchis is the richest of the Soviet lands, the warmest, the sunniest, the most fertile. So say the poets, Shot'ha Rust'hvelli and Alexander Pushkin.

"But this land is covered with swamps. We're going to drain the swamps and create a new tropical region here. At this display you'll see the first of the plants that are going to grow in Colchis.

"It would be a great crime to use this golden soil (I beg your pardon for the comparison) to grow coarse crops like corn and millet. You've been planting corn and millet all your lives. Now you are going to plant tea and mandarins, lemons and ramie. The seacoast, from Anaklia to Cobuleti, will become a zone of health resorts.

"But the value of our work is not only in this, that we drain the swamps and create a new soil—that we wipe out the old swamp vegetation, alder and rushes, and introduce an entirely new plant life. That's not the only purpose of our work, comrades. There is something more: to build up a healthy generation.

"You could never work more than four hours a day. Malaria drained you as we squeeze out a sponge. You lay in your wooden homes and groaned, too weak to lift a hand. Thus it was for centuries, comrades. But it will be so no longer. We shall kill this disease, and apples will bloom on our children's cheeks."

Kahiani's own cheeks reddened, as he caught himself in this poetic figure of speech.

"We are building up a humid subtropical region. We are creating a new landscape, worthy of the age of Socialism. But we must remember, comrades, that Nature cannot thrive without wise and untiring human supervision. We must take good care of the new land, or it will regress.



"The history of our earth offers many examples of Nature's degeneration when deprived of human care. Take this tree right here, that yields such enormous luscious figs. Leave it to its own devices, and in ten years it will lose caste entirely. Its fruits will be tasteless, and no larger than a nut. Every one of you knows the difference between wild and cultivated grapes, or apples. All this is elementary. But some"—Kahiani glanced at Vano Akhmetelli—"have been very slow in accepting it."

The band played a flourish. Korkia nudged his grandson. Soso came forward. His cheeks flushed a tomato red. He said a few words in Georgian: that the Mingrelian children would tend the new trees and groves, and help the engineers to build a happy Colchis.

The child was applauded heartily. Again the band played a flourish. Christophoridi, lurking in the background, thought he would die of envy.

Then Pakhomov spoke, and Nevskaya. Christophoridi did not understand a word. And finally, old Artem Korkia came out to the front. There was a movement in the crowd.

Korkia bowed to Kahiani. His lips parted. He thought a while, and said:

"*Madlobeli, katso*. Thank you, man."

Again his lips parted, but no words came. He cleared his throat huskily and held out his boxwood staff to Kahiani.

He was proud of his staff. He had carved it when he was only twenty. It was stronger than iron. Let Kahiani use it to the end of his days, and let those days be many.

Kahiani took the staff and kissed the old man. The band struck up a lively march, and the crowd broke up to examine the exhibits.

In the *duhan*, that evening, Artem Korkia described to Becho and Gulia the wonderful speech he had made at the opening of the agricultural display.

"I came out in front of everyone, and this is what I said: 'I lived all my life in Horga, and every year the water washed away my fields. Twice I was almost drowned in the swamps. I ate nothing but corn bread and cheese. The fever sucked my body dry and stretched the skin taut on my bones. Three of my sons died of the fever.' That's what I said. 'I thank you,'



I said, 'in the name of the old! I thank you in the name of our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren! The Soviet state and our dear leader spend so much money to make our lives happier. So much money, *katso*! Machinery, workers, engineers! And brains, they cost no little.' That's what I said at the opening.

"My grandson here," I said. "He's wiser than his grandfather. The new times gallop like a rider on a fine horse, and we old folk, we may lag a bit, but we hurry after. Because the rider leads us along the right road, and we can't get lost any more." That's what I said, *katso*. And everybody clapped their hands, and the music played a flummish."

"Flourish," said Becho. He knew the old man had not uttered a word at the opening, but tactfully refrained from comment.

"Maybe it's flourish," Korkia conceded. "'There's no more moneybags now, nor Mensheviks—the ones that started the trouble out at Senaki. Now a man must be kind to his fellow men.' That's what I told them all, *katso*."

Gulia believed every word. He was astonished. He had been too bashful to attend the opening, and now he was sorry.

"In five days," he said, "Gabunia will open the main canal, and the water from the mountains and the forests will flow into the Hopi river and on to the sea. Gabunia told me to look you up, Becho, and ask you to come to the canal."

"What for?"

"You'll deck out the houses, and paint golden letters on the archway."

"Ho!" cried Becho, smiling. "We'll organize a better holiday than any Dadiani ever saw."

"I've got business with you, too, old chatterbox," said Gulia, laying a hand on Korkia's shoulder. "It's a great secret. You and I go out to the canal tonight, and tomorrow we'll make for the swamps. You'll help me do a big job for Gabunia."

"What sort of job, *katso*?"

"Ssh! It's political. You must keep your mouth shut."

Korkia nodded agreement. He was an old man enough, but, well and good, he'd make one last trip into the swamps. Gabunia, son of the engine driver from Samtredi, was worth it. And a political business, too!



## THE PHASIAN WOMAN

ARTEM KORKIA was so overwhelmed by Gulia's mysterious bearing that all the way he did not say a word.

They had been on their feet since early morning. Loading two buffaloes with spades and axes, ropes and sacking, they had plunged deep into the jungle.

The buffaloes were stubborn beasts. They kept trying to lie down and wallow in the swamps. Gulia lashed their grey hides so soundly that the forest echoed, and frightened jackals wailed and laughed far off at the ends of the earth.

Towards noon, the hunters reached the ruins of the Roman fortress.

Gulia noticed that the forest had undergone a change. The foliage drooped mournfully, sweeping the ground. It was grey and lifeless. A blazing sun hung overhead, in a suffocating sky.

They squatted on the fortress walls to eat their lunch.

"In the old days there was a fortress here, Artem," said Gulia, munching his cheese. "And in the fortress there was a monument. The monument is still here. It's sunk in the swamp. It's worth a lot of money, *katso*!"

Korkia received this announcement with complete indifference.

When they had eaten, they felled two small trees, squared them down with their axes, and shaped them into runners. The result was the skeleton of a sledge, which Gulia covered with a bed of branches and fresh leaves. Then he harnessed the buffaloes to the sledge and drove them to a little bog, where a pile of dry branches protruded from the mud.

"What are we going to do?" asked Korkia.

"Dig up the monument and bring it to Gabunia. He's very fond of monuments, *katso*."

Korkia liked the idea well enough. They set to work, throwing apart the heaped-up branches, and soon discovered an arm: a delicate, feminine arm, of rosy marble. One finger was missing.

"Jackal gnawed it off, the cursed beast," Korkia muttered, shaking his head. His eyes were round with wonder.

Carefully, they began to dig away the earth around the statue. Soon the head appeared, and then the shoulders. An



hour later, in a deep pit, half full of water, the figure stood entirely free. It was a smiling woman, loosely draped in marble tissue.

Korkia had been digging busily all this time, pausing only to catch his breath or to lubricate his palms with spittle. He had been too occupied even to glance at the statue. But now the work was finished. Straightening up, he turned his eyes to the result of his labour, only to start back in horror. He scrambled up out of the pit and backed hastily away.

"Dirty liar!" he shouted at Gulia. "Where's your politics? It's a naked woman!"

"I beg an old man's pardon," returned Gulia, with biting sarcasm. "I sincerely beg your pardon, *katso*. A clever man like you shouldn't be such a fool. This monument is worth a lot of money. We'll give it to Gabunia. And later on, maybe, it'll be sold abroad, and the money will go to buy something we all need. I'm no fool either, Artem. Go get the ropes and the sacking."

Too bewildered to reply, Korkia went to the sledge and got the sacking. Gulia dipped water from the bog and poured it over the statue, until the living warmth of the ancient marble began to gleam through the green layers of slime.

Gulia covered the statue with sacking, laid it about with trimmed branches, and tied the whole with rope. Then the statue was dragged to the surface, with the help of the buffaloes, and laid carefully on the sledge.

The road back was slow. The buffaloes kept stopping. Gulia and Korkia argued all the way, over those intricate and difficult problems: civilization, culture, monuments.

Gulia did not know how to express the vague feelings that had guided his decision to bring the statue in from the swamps. He would have been sorry, had the statue really been sold abroad. The canal was celebrating. All Colchis was celebrating. And Gulia felt that this statue would be a fitting adornment to the holiday, an unexpected gift wrested from the swamps.

Night had fallen when they reached the canal. There was a light in Gabunia's window. Gulia tapped softly on the pane, and Gabunia came out.

"Bring a flashlight," Gulia whispered. "Come with me."



I have something interesting to show you. I found it in the swamp."

Gabunia did not answer, though he glanced suspiciously at Gulia. He took his flashlight and silently followed the former hunter.

In a thicket just beyond the last barrack, the buffaloes were munching noisily. Korkia stood beside them. His face was pale. He was afraid Gabunia would rebuke them, or, even worse, make fun of them for a pair of stupid old fools.

Gabunia entered the thicket.

"Now!" said Gulia.

Gabunia lit his flashlight. Its silvery rays revealed a marble statue, smiling up from a bed of dark leaves.

Korkia glanced at Gabunia, and stiffened fearfully. The engineer's eyes were fixed on the statue. His brows were drawn together. His face was strangely pale. For a long time he did not speak. At length, he asked brusquely:

"Where did you find it?"

"In the ruins of the old fortress, *katso*," said Gulia. "It's for you. You're fond of monuments."

Gabunia threw an arm across Gulia's shoulders.

"Thanks, friend," he said softly. "You've realized what many of the wisest men refuse to understand. We'll gather together everything worth while that remains from former times, and our wealth will be greater than any wealth the world has known. We're very fortunate, comrade. You may not see that, but your children will. Thank you, Gulia. This thing is too beautiful to belong to any one man. It must belong to all."

Gabunia asked them to wrap up the statue again, and then all three bent to lift it and carry it into Gabunia's room. When the work was finished, Gulia and Korkia, elated, went away to their barrack.

Gabunia sat far into the night, leafing old books. At last he found the passage he sought, in Arrian, and marked it in pencil. The passage read:

"On the left bank of the Phasis there was erected a statue of a Phasian woman of amazing beauty."

It was evidently this statue that Gulia had found.

The Swiss traveller Dubois de Montperreux, one of the



few Europeans who had visited the ruined fortress, set its date at approximately 100 B.C. Hence, the statue was two thousand years old.

Gabunia turned back the sacking and looked into the marble features. Two thousand years had passed over this clear forehead and arched brows, over this smile, imbued with tenderness—that same kindness of man to man of which Korkia had spoken in the *duhan*. Two thousand years had covered the rosy marble with a network of fine grey cracks.

As day was breaking, Gabunia threw open his window. Now and then a bird flashed by among the treetops. The foliage rustled in the morning breeze. Low behind the forest the sun was rising, an enormous, glittering gem.

The room was filled with a mercurial play of light and shadow. A bright ray touched the marble face, and the wind caressed the smiling lips. Gabunia realized that he was looking upon the work of some great, unknown master.

On the tall flagpoles at the entrance to the canal, red pennants fluttered, reaching out to the mountains. The monsoon blew from the west, and the air of this seacoast country filled the lungs with youthful vigour.

Still studying the statue, Gabunia reflected that its forgotten sculptor, two thousand years before our day, had embodied in his creation the spirit of Colchis' wondrous future.

## FIREWORKS IN THE FOREST

WHAT TRIFLES will sometimes create a happy mood! A fresh breeze, even if it overturns the vase of bright leaves on the table. A bit of orange peel dancing on the waves. The crunch of gravel—a familiar voice outside the window—and the sky, the sky, a blue dome over the quiet sea.

So thought Nevskaya, that early morning. But Chup was inclined to disagree.

Orange peel on the waves was downright indiscipline. Those brazen cooks on the Greek steamers had gotten out of hand again, dumping their garbage overboard in the harbour.

And the water from the overturned vase had stained the tablecloth.



Gravel squeaked like new leather. If you had nerves, it gave you the shudders.

As to voices outside the window, there might be all sorts and kinds. The voice of "St. Anthony's fire," the redheaded pilot, was familiar enough, but it couldn't make anyone particularly happy. The pilot lisped offensively: "Thwing her over! Thtarboard, thtarboard, I thay!"

The sky—well, that was another matter. Only the sky couldn't be called a trifle. The sky—yes, that was something!

Nevskaya did not argue with Chup. Even his grumbling was a joy, that morning. And the greatest joy of all was the sound of the horn, when the car arrived to take them to Chala-didi for the opening of the canal.

Chup came out in dazzling white. The sun caught at the gold braid on his uniform sleeve, and his grey eyes seemed keener than ever above his close-shaven cheeks.

Chup lifted Yolochka to the front seat, beside the driver. Christophoridi preferred to ride on the running board. Christophoridi never once stopped smiling, all that day. And next morning he wondered what made the skin around his lips so sore!

Nevskaya lingered in her room a moment, and the others were all in the car when she came out. The captain saw a greenish glint in the clear puddles left by last night's rain, reflecting the soft sea-green of Nevskaya's dress.

She approached the car, with a rustle of wind-swept silk, and a stray beam of sunlight showed the captain the bright depths of her laughing eyes.

Chup got out to help her in, a thing he had never done before. Her warm, strong hand pressed his, and he sighed. Ah, 'twas a cursed thing, the sailor's life!

Deck, helm, hold, bunkering, and mishaps at sea—life had slipped by while he was busy with such things, and he had never come into contact with these beautiful, smiling women. Not little bourgeois chits in striped beach suits, with bright-red lacquered finger nails, but women of his own sort: the kind who had battled at the fronts, who worked and sacrificed, whose lives were devoted to the future.

Ah, 'twas a ten-times cursed thing, the sailor's life!



"You've missed it all, you old devil," thought Chup dejectedly. "The young folks have left you behind."

They stopped off at the experimental gardens, and cut a huge bouquet of flowers.

The wind often cast the end of Nevskaya's green scarf against the captain's cheek. He trembled at these light blows, as at the touch of well-loved fingers.

Nevskaya laughed all the way. What delighted her most was the behaviour of the village dogs.

As the car entered a village, the dogs would come sauntering lazily into the street, wearing expressions of unutterable boredom, of complete indifference to everything in the great, wide world. They might even yawn, or sit down to search for fleas. But the moment the car reached the domain of any of these dogs, the creature would suddenly feign the most dreadful fury. Hoarsely barking and growling, it would race along beside the car, just out of reach of the wheels. Then, having seen the intruders safely out of its territory, it would just as suddenly subside into its former indifference, and limp back to its gateway with the old air of unutterable boredom.

Speckled sunlight, dancing on green leaves—swirling white dust and mischievous gusts of wind—the barking of dogs and the shouts of children, merging with the even roar of the racing motor.

That day the barometer in Gabunia's room said, "fair."

Gabunia and Mikha could not conquer their anxiety. Mikha kept peering up at the sky for signs of rain. But there was not a hint of cloud. It was a day of crystal azure, hushed and windless. The only sound was the tapping of hammers and axes under the trees on the bank of the canal, where carpenters were preparing a great, long table and benches.

The Mingrelian workers were all in their barracks, shaving. Becho and Gulia were rigging up an enormous streamer over the entrance to the canal: "The Soviet Florida." Syoma was busily stuffing paper cartridges with mysterious powders. He had been whistling and grunting all morning—a sign of the greatest good humour.

The guests began to arrive at noon. Kahiani came first,



with Pakhomov and Vano Akhmetelli. Then came Chup and Nevskaya, then Grisha, at the head of the militia band.

Red banners were reflected in the water of the canal. Lianas hung from the trees over a table set for a hundred.

The old "Have a Bite" *duhan* keeper fretted and fumed because there were not enough tablecloths. The smell of roast lamb rose from the camp kitchen, mingling with the fragrance of crisp cakes and purple Isabella wine.

A narrow red ribbon was stretched across the canal, from bank to bank, just above the surface of the water.

Kahiani and Gabunia, with Artem Korkia—the oldest of the local people—descended from the pier into the waiting motor launch.

Syoma stood at the helm, steadying the launch with a boathook. He was freshly shaved, and very trim. He stood at attention, as though on parade. Syoma knew well enough what was fitting, and when, of the old ship discipline.

The workers gathered along the banks.

Kahiani raised his hand. Syoma started the motor.

The idea was to direct the launch so that its nose would snap the red ribbon stretched across the canal. That was not easy. Syoma squinted down the water, driving straight for the ribbon. The launch rushed forward, faster and faster.

Its nose struck the ribbon fairly. The red line stretched taut and snapped, and the torn ends flew free. The launch chugged furiously down the canal.

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" cried Syoma, waving his hand.

He was chorussed loudly from the shores. The band struck up the *Internationale*. The workers bared their heads. Syoma stopped the motor, and his passengers rose to their feet.

For the first time, the virgin forest rang to music and song.

Nevskaya glanced at Chup. He stood with his hand to his cap in salute. His suntanned fingers looked black against the dazzling whiteness of his uniform. He made a figure of great strength and calm. It occurred to Nevskaya that people do not so often hear the *Internationale*; that its grand strains enter people's hearts as the crowning measure of achievement, as the music of victory, of completed labour. Perhaps that is why cheeks grow pale with suppressed emotion.



When the music ended, Kahiani shouted:  
“*Gamarjoba*, comrades! Joy to the victors!”

“*Gaguimarjos!*” the workers responded.

“Comrades,” said Kahiani. “The canal is finished, and we may allow ourselves one evening for rest and celebration. You have done a great work, comrades, every one of you, from the oldest worker down to the young, Soviet-trained engineers. I thank you, in the name of the Bolshevik Party. You have gained a victory over swamps and forests, over rain and fever.

“You have not only drained the land. You have done much more. I should like to tell you of two incidents. There is nothing poetic about them. Just bare fact.

“This old man here, Artem Korkia. All his life he wore around his neck an empty nutshell, with a dried spider inside it. His father wore such a shell, and his grandfather. In the old days, as you all know, the people of the swamp country believed that dried spiders were the best cure for fever. Old women whispered prayers over them, and people believed that the spiders and the old women’s prayers would protect them from sickness.

“But Artem Korkia took out his nutshell, just now, and threw it into the water. ‘What do I need nuts and spiders for,’ he said, ‘when the engineers will kill malaria better than spiders?’ So you see, your labours are teaching men the elements of culture.

“And there’s one more thing I must tell you about, comrades, a thing that some of us may see in the wrong light. I mean the statue of the Phasian woman that has been found in the swamps. I’m no judge of sculpture. I’m a soil expert, not a Michelangelo or an Antokolsky. But the very fact that men like Gulia, a simple hunter, and this very same old Artem Korkia, should realize, not too clearly, perhaps, but they did realize the cultural value of things like this—that fact makes me rejoice, comrades, even though I’m no judge of the fine points of a statue.

“We shall take the very best, comrades, of every culture and civilization. We shall add it all to the furnace of our Socialist ideals, and we shall create the greatest culture humankind has ever known.



"Long live the Soviet subtropics! You are creating them by the labour of your hands. Rest, now, comrades, and be merry!"

After Kahiani's speech, they all gathered around the huge table. The *duhan* keeper bustled about, red and perspiring. He was torn between horror and rapture. Rapture at this great feast beneath the open sky, just as Becho had painted it, a feast for a hundred, all the work of his hands, for the first time in his life. Horror, because there were not enough tablecloths, and there might not be enough dishes.

Pakhomov looked cheerfully down the table.

"You're Argonauts, all of you," he said to Gabunia. "Jason discovered the Golden Fleece in Colchis, and you've discovered the tropics. Incidentally, have you ever wondered what the ancients meant by a golden fleece? Just an ordinary sheepskin. They'd spread it out at the bottom of a gold-bearing river, and weight the edges with stone to keep it in place. And the grains of gold would collect in the fleece."

"It's very simple," said Kahiani. "No poetry about it. A primitive method of gold washing, that's all."

"There's lots of poetry about the simplest things," Pakhomov retorted amicably. "Legends contain the seed of the future. It's man's aspiration to lofty ideals that gives rise to legend. The most beautiful of all is the Icarus myth. Every flyer, today, is a new Icarus. The myth of Jason tells how he ploughed a field with a yoke of fire-breathing bulls. Now, what are fire-breathing bulls?"

"Tractors," cried Gabunia, chuckling.

Pakhomov nodded. Chup laughed aloud.

"Man must have faith in his own ability," Pakhomov went on. "And then he will turn the course of rivers, and grow lemons in Siberia. I'm speaking seriously. Man has to believe in the strength and power of his art. When Orpheus sang and played his lyre, the sea grew calm. The Greeks wrote of this in all seriousness. They naively believed in it. They believed in the power of art; and technology is also an art, Comrade Kahiani. Let's put our faith in it, as the Greeks put their faith in Orpheus' lyre. You are realizing the myth of the conquest of Colchis, of the Golden Fleece, of the bold voyage of the Argonauts. Glory be to you!"



"I think very highly of you," mumbled Kahiani, very much embarrassed, "and so I must believe you. Have it your own way, then."

Nevskaya sat listening to the talk around her. She heard the debate over Jason and legend, tractors and flyers. She heard the merry talk of the workers, and Mikha's piercing laughter; Gulia's hoarse voice, the children's chatter, Chup's quiet jokes.

The band was playing a lively tune she had never heard before. Sunbeams strayed across the table, throwing golden bands across the white cloths, the bottles and glasses, the swarthy hands of the feasters. They peeped into the glasses, and made the red wine glow. They turned the crisp cakes into gold.

It was a simple, noisy holiday, as though in one big, close-knit family.

Nevskaya did not speak. She felt that something had happened, that something had come to her, which she could not grasp—something fine and good. What could it be?

And suddenly she knew.

Friendship! Genuine friendship, the very finest thing that the earth holds. It arises in work and in danger, in conflicts and triumphs, in reverses and impassioned debate: a new emotion of our new epoch, the finest that mankind has known.

Nevskaya turned to the workers. Many smiled to her, and raised their glasses to drink her health. They were proud of her, of this learned woman who had worked shoulder to shoulder with them the whole night through under the pouring rain, when the embankments were in danger. They were proud of her, of this beautiful woman, in her gleaming silken gown.

She turned again to look at Gabunia, Kahiani, Pakhomov. All friends. They were still deep in their argument about myths and legends.

Her eyes fell on Chup. Christophoridi, Yolochka, and Soso were staring at the captain, open-mouthed. He was telling them a story. He drew a stern face, then suddenly burst into laughter. The children's clear voices joined. Nevskaya laughed too, she could not have said why.

The sun hung low over the treetops. It was sinking



rapidly to the west. Its slanted rays turned the foliage into glinting bronze.

The sun was sinking into the sea, far beyond the forest, when a high, almost girlish voice cut through the din of talk and laughter. It was Mikha, singing an ancient Georgian song:

*"King Iraclia's infinite power  
Failed him in one thing, only in one.  
His lovely queen drove him forth from her bower,  
His beautiful queen would not share his throne."*

Gabunia bent to Nevskaya's ear, translating the words of the song. Pakhomov bowed his head, shading his eyes with his hand. Kahiani sat looking out over the clear, dark waters of the canal, where the evening sky lay inverted.

*"The king returned to his gardens, dejected,  
And wept alone till the golden morn.  
Shepherds and huntsmen knew him rejected,  
And made bitter mock of their king lovelorn."*

Chup toyed with an empty wineglass. His fingers trembled. He knew the language, and understood the song. A cursed thing, the sailor's life! It seemed to him that the song was sung of Chup, an old sailor to whom love had been denied.

*"I have nought to my name but my tatters,  
I have nought but my dagger and sheath.  
But I claim the smiles of the queenly Tamara,  
And King Iraclia envies me."*

A heavy blossom struck Chup's hand. Dark petals scattered over the table.

The captain lifted the flower and put it in his buttonhole. He knew these black roses, already over-ripe. They grew only at the experimental gardens.

He peeped sidewise at Nevskaya. The corners of her lips were twitching. She was trying not to smile. She would not return the captain's glance.

"Hullo!" cried Syoma suddenly, tapping a swift tattoo with heels and toes. "Hullo! Ladies and gentlemen, the show goes on!"



The workers sprang to their feet. The band broke into the *Lezghinka*, and Gabunia was off at once, whirling in the swift, light national dance. Mikha followed, with a wild shriek, sweeping the glasses from the table with his sleeves.

The drums beat fast and loud. The feasters crowded into a circle around the dancers, clapping their hands in time with the music.

“*Ekh! Ekh! Once again!*  
*More and more and then again!*”

Loud shouts acclaimed the efforts of the fat *duhan* keeper, who twirled about like a top, his wide cotton trousers swelling out like sails. He clapped his hands above his head, and flew lightly around the circle.

“*Ash! Ash! Ash! Ash!*” cried the crowd and the dancers. A light cloud of dust rose over the forest.

The general ecstasy reached its apogee when Nevskaya floated out into the circle. Her green dress shimmered in the fading light, and a warm breeze seemed to fan the watchers as she passed.

“Hurrah!” yelled Christophoridi, turning cartwheels round the circle. “Shine ’em right! Shine ’em bright!”

Soso turned cartwheels in Christophoridi’s wake.

Artem Korkia waved his staff and coughed. Gulia stamped his feet, but would not go into the circle.

“Joy has come to our swamps, *katso*, it has come at last,” cried Korkia.

Chup lifted Yolochka to his shoulders so that she could watch the dancers.

Wildest of all was Vano Akhmetelli. The devil take the nutria, and keep it! Faster, there, faster!

Vano danced with furious enjoyment. Flying past Yolochka, he whooped and rolled his eyes.

“*Ekh! Ekh! Once again!*  
*More and more and then again!*”

“Ugh! It makes me laugh to watch these people dance,” cried militiaman Grisha, bursting into the circle. All the dancers had to stop. Grisha twirled so impetuously that he



was almost invisible. People shot away from him as though he were a bomb, on the point of bursting.

Just then a piercing whistle cut the air. A rocket exploded among the stars, sending down a burst of sparkling spray. Syoma's fireworks had begun.

The rockets flew up in bunches, with a deafening din. Only then did the revellers see that night had descended—blue, early night, pungent with gunpowder and wine.

Bonfires were lit along the banks of the canal. The water turned into liquid flame, its glowing crimson slashed by the white arcs of the flying rockets.

Thousands upon thousands of fireflies flitted among the trees, flashing and fading. It was as though the starry sky had descended close to earth, swooping and whirling over the forest—now retreating in terror from the Bengal lights, now brushing the treetops again with its soft blue train.

*"Ekh! Ekh! Once again!*

*More and more and then again!"*

Yolochka fell asleep in the captain's arms. He took her away to Gabunia's room and laid her down on the narrow cot. Red and white gleams passed, like summer lightning, over the smiling face of the Phasian statue.

"Ah, it's a ten-times cursed thing, the sailor's life!"

He stood at the window, watching the fiery magic in the sky.

Nevskaya came softly into the room. She laid her light, hot hand on the captain's shoulder and stood beside him, watching the fireworks. Chup was afraid to move. Neither spoke.

Then Nevskya left, as softly as she had come. Chup heard the rustle of her dress. He heard the door close. And suddenly the night began to spin. Chup clutched at the window frame, and passed a hand over his eyes. It came away wet.

"Fool!" he muttered. "You held out for forty-seven years, and all of a sudden. . . ."

The night was a world of music and song and light, as Chup stood thinking that only now, in his forty-seventh year, had he learned the meaning of complete happiness.

He turned quickly on his heel and left the room.



## BAREFOOT ARGONAUTS

AT DAYBREAK Syoma brought a motor launch up to the pier. They had decided to return to Poti by way of the canal, the Hopi river, and the sea. The day promised to be fair again.

The bonfires were still smouldering along the banks of the canal. Dew dripped from the leaves and hissed on the hot ashes. Birds sang in the forest.

Syoma's passengers were Nevskaya, the children, Chup, and Gabunia.

When the launch shot past the barracks, the workers waved their hats and sang out greetings. Then came the forest, slipping by in a green waterfall of foliage. And then the canal was past, and the launch rocked in the mysterious shade of the winding Hopi.

Syoma began to sing. The sun rose, a huge white ball, behind him, casting long shadows over the water.

On and on they chugged, through the warm odours of foliage and river water, until at last the sea came into view, and the wind brought the cool tang of seaweed and wet sand.

The little town of Redout-Calé lay mirrored in the river, with every detail of pile-built pink and blue houses, like a bright, ragged shawl spread over the surface of the water.

The hum of the motor ran ahead, from house to house, banging at the doors and waking the people. A woman with a baby appeared on a veranda. A cock crowed, and a flock of pigeons circled overhead.

The launch flew out into the sea and turned southward in a graceful curve. It splattered spray against the sides of an old sailing boat at anchor near the river mouth.

Breakers were beating dully, far away.

The barefoot, suntanned crew of the sailing boat sat on the deck, dangling their legs over the water. Smoking their pipes, they looked out, new Argonauts, over the shores of Colchis.



# SHORT STORIES







## THE AUSTRALIAN FROM PILYEVO STATION

VANYA ZUBOV's father was wracked by swamp fever every year with the advent of spring. He would lie on a high bunk, coughing and weeping from the acrid smoke: rotting wood was burned in the storm passage to smoke out the mosquitoes.

A deaf old rustic nicknamed Grandad Twanger used to come and treat him. Grandad was a quack and a crank; he was feared throughout the district, in all the remote villages scattered about the forest.

He would pound dried crabs in a mortar, preparing healing powders for Vanya's father, and shout as he pricked Vanya with his malicious little shifting eyes:

"Is this what you call earth? It's podsol! You can't even get a potato to flower on it—the blasted ground won't let it take root! The devil take that podsol! That's how the tsar's thanked us for our efforts—now the people've got no place to go!"

"That's right enough," sighed Vanya's father. "No place to go."

"Stop that mumbling!" shouted Grandad. "Just like a blamed woodpecker: 'no place, no place.' There is a place too! Plenty of people're running off to Siberia, across the Amur river, and ploughing up the rich lands there!"

"They're running off, sure enough," groaned Vanya's father from his bunk.

"Sure enough!" Grandad continued to shout. "Who says so? Nobody's running anywhere! The people are like sheep—huddling together in their pen, even though that blamed pen of theirs is worse'n death for them. You like to sit in



a warm place, all right, but when it comes to seeking your fortune, you're just not there!"

"That's right too, our people aren't any good. . . . They just haven't any guts," agreed the tormented father.

"Eh? What's that?!" screamed Grandad. "You trying to argue with me? Just look at that fine gentleman, will you! You've got guts all right, but the devil only knows what for! You've got guts enough to drink vodka, and to drive us oldsters to the grave, and to go to court over that podsol all your life!"

Vanya's father would say no more. It was no use arguing with Grandad.

"Here's this youngster of yours sitting around doing nothing!" Grandad would prod Vanya with his knobby staff, frightening the boy out of his wits. "Chase him off to Siberia to look for land! He's getting on for sixteen, and all he does is frisk about and eat you out of house and home. You get as much work out of him as butter out of a cat. He's had schooling, hasn't he? Well, then, pull him out of that corner by the scruff of his neck and send him packing!"

"What are you carrying on so, Grandad?" Vanya's father would plead. "Where can I send him when a ticket to Siberia costs thirty rubles, if not all of forty?"

"Oh, you fool!" Grandad would thunder in indignation. "What'll happen to him if he goes without a ticket? Can't he hide under the seat, or ride in a boxcar or on the roof—and get there just the same? What did you think? Think he ought to travel first class, clean and comfortable?"

Grandad would snigger maliciously.

"A million!" he would suddenly roar and bring his pestle down so hard that Vanya's father would groan. "Not less'n a million snoop back and forth on the railroad every blessed year without tickets. Stowaways they're called. That's what he ought to be—a blamed stowaway! Let him taste misery and seek his fortune! As a stowaway!"

With that Grandad would flourish his staff, burst into a shrill, feminine laugh, and cross himself. The medicine was ready.

That summer Vanya's father died of Grandad's powders. His mother, Darya, a shallow and stingy old woman, begged



Vanya to stowaway on a train to Siberia—perhaps they really did give the poor folk rich lands out there? She did not sleep nights, thinking how they would live in Siberia.

"We'll build a five-cornered cottage out of free timber," she would mutter, and to Vanya it sounded as if she were praying. "Right on the riverbank. Oh, Virgin Mary, Sacred Mother of ours! And the river'll surely be swift, and it'll flow from out of great forests and over golden sands. We'll plant buckwheat, put in hives, keep bees. . . ."

"You ought to sleep, Mama."

But she would mutter on and on. Her muttering merged with the murmur of the autumn rain, making a single prolonged nocturnal sound, and to this murmur Vanya would fall asleep. He was afraid to go to Siberia. He knew that many people went to Siberia, but never once had he seen anybody return from there. And his father used to say that the place sucked in people like quicksand.

For the trip Vanya's mother gave him some bread, some onions, and a hunk of stale bacon thickly sprinkled with yellow salt. She went with him on the narrow-gauge line as far as Pilyevo Station.

A tiresome October rain was falling. It swept the cold, rotting leaves from the birches and pattered against the iron roof of the car. Vanya looked out of the window and wanted to shout to his mother that he was afraid and wished to go back home, to the warm ashes in the stove and the cockroaches. His mother must have divined his thoughts, for she shook her dry, shrivelled fist at him; and then, with the same clenched fist, she wiped her tears away.

Thus he was to remember her the rest of his life: in the old homespun skirt, with feet blue and heavily veined and grimy, and with a woman's unfathomable tears in her eyes.

Only towards the end of winter did Vanya reach Vladivostok. He got several beatings on the way, from station gendarmes, from train porters, and from roving stevedores whose livelihood he threatened by offering to do the hardest labour for almost nothing.

Siberia struck him as a cold, bleak country where people hid their wheat behind strong walls and heavy locks so that



the poor could not get at it, and where nothing grew except interminable mouldy forests in which the snow lay knee-deep.

In Vladivostok Vanya got a job as furnaceman in a Chinese laundry. He had to feed wood fires under four large boilers with laundry, which gave off an unhealthy grey steam. A white-haired old Chinese squatted nearby, smoking and scrutinizing Vanya through yellow, bleary eyes.

"You're young, I'm old," he said, and spat through his long teeth. "You're Russian, I'm Chinese, but it's just as bad for both of us. We have to eat little and work a lot."

"It's bad, Grandad," agreed Vanya. "Seems there's no end to this life of ours."

"You're young, I'm old," muttered the Chinese. "Eat little, work a lot."

The Chinese was so gaunt that his baggy blue trousers kept slipping down over his hips, revealing a brown, shrivelled belly. He ironed men's shirts. This monotonous job seemed worse than hard labour to Vanya. It was endless: every week the same shirts came back to the laundry, and the Chinese ironed them once more, only to iron them again and again the following weeks.

In the spring the old Chinese died. He fell flat on his ironing board, and his heavy iron dropped out of his hands with a clatter.

They buried him outside of town, in a vacant lot overgrown with grey grass.

It was a damp, misty spring, but during the funeral, while the Chinese squatted by the fresh grave and muttered farewell prayers, the sun appeared. Its light fell full upon the water, and the shore and ocean were suddenly flooded with such a dazzling gleam and translucency that Vanya at once decided to leave the laundry and go to sea as a stoker.

For several years he worked as a stoker on the freighter *Lan-Su*, which flew the Chinese flag. At first the *Lan-Su* sailed between Vladivostok and Shanghai; then, when the war broke out, she went to Australia and from there carried sheep and frozen meat to Batavia and Singapore.

The ship had a mixed crew. Norwegians predominated—strange, silent men with blue eyes. Her captain was an oily



little Greek with gold teeth named Xidios. He was always drunk and invariably wore a jacket plastered with cushion feathers and shreds of pipe tobacco.

The ship was as dirty as her captain. It seemed to Vanya—his name was John now—that her very appearance at the tropical shores poisoned the air around, compounded of the breath of springs, grass and twining flowers. The ship emanated a ripe stench of sheep dung and burnt coffee. They drank coffee from morning to night, and several times a day the cook emptied kids of brown dregs into the green ocean waters.

Vanya soon grew accustomed to the shipboard life. It was not rich in events: the same ports of call, the same dark skies, the same wooded islands that seemed sunk up to their green treetops in the water, the same bedbugs in the bunks, the same sailors' talk about the thieving cook and spree on shore.

During Vanya's third year on the *Lan-Su* the ship grounded in still weather on the Big Coral Reef off the coast of Australia. The reef stretched away to the horizon like a huge sponge covered with a thin layer of water. Submarine rocks jutted up perpendicularly. One moment the lifeboat grazed against them, and the next it floated over bottomless wells; it was hard work rowing to shore. The beach could be seen in the distance—a long strip of land gleaming white in the sun.

As they approached the shore Vanya glanced into the water and saw some round seaweeds. They looked like globes of green smoke swaying slowly in the tepid water.

Vanya recalled the Boroviye lakes, where he used to go fishing in the summertime. The same kind of seaweeds grew there, and they swarmed with small fry. He used to step into the black water, spread his shirt over the seaweeds, and pull them out onto the shore together with the fry. The seaweeds were so slender that nothing remained of them on his shirt but a fine web. And that dried quickly and crumbled into green dust.

When the boat finally landed, Vanya stripped and dived into the water. He caught a seaweed with his striped jersey and dragged it out onto the hot white sand. It smelled



just like the seaweeds in the Boroviye lakes—of clean, deep waters.

Vanya unfolded his jersey; in it lay a toothy grey fish with bloodshot eyes, flapping its prickly, bony fins. Vanya picked up the fish, but just as he was about to throw it into the water it twisted around and sank its teeth into his palm.

Vanya tore the fish loose and flung it onto the sand. Blood oozed from his palm. The fish emitted piping, wheezing sounds. A Malayan sailor told him that it was poisonous, that in general there were lots of poisonous fish in the ocean, and that now Vanya's hand would undoubtedly shrivel up.

Vanya felt like crying, but he held back the tears and only let loose a few Russian oaths.

"Everything's cockeyed out here," he told the Malayan. "Even your fish bite like dogs. It's enough to give a fellow the blues."

The Malayan smiled guiltily.

From then on Vanya was beset by nostalgia. It grew on him steadily. Everything around him was pervaded with it, just as a poor man's bread is soaked with water. Nostalgia was in the very sky of this land, dusty and high, and sprinkled at night with a handful of alien stars; it was in the dry air, in the barkless trees, in the clucking sounds of English speech; but most of all it was in the exhausting, monotonous labour.

Vanya and the Malayan sailor found work on a sugarcane plantation. From dawn to dusk the men toiled there in rows, bending almost double and hacking under the roots of the canes with their thick, curved knives. The air hung close and motionless over the plantation and gave them headaches. Once Vanya tasted the sugar cane—it was sickeningly sweet, and sticky, and smelled of drugs.

The overseer was a tall, lean man with a broken nose. They called him the "Boss." He never shouted or lost his temper. Without saying a word he would walk up slowly to a worker who had displeased him, punch him hard in the face, and then pass on just as slowly and deliberately. The men were afraid of him. It was rumoured that he had once been a card shark notorious all over the Pacific.



At night they slept in barracks. They barely talked to one another. They were a polyglot crew, hired only for the duration of the harvest. In the evening they drank their coffee and then flung themselves on their bunks to sleep until daybreak. The Boss made a silent round of the barracks and turned out the lights; sometimes he kicked a coloured worker—a Malayan or a Negro—off his bunk and felt under his pallet for whiskey.

One day the Boss punched a Chinese working woman in the face. She gave a piercing shriek and threw a knife at him. The knife fell to the ground, raising a little whirl of dust. The Boss turned round reluctantly and advanced on the Chinese woman. She began to tremble all over and to utter piercing screams.

The field hands straightened up. The dry, scorching sun beat down on their heads, and at first the reddish film before their eyes prevented them from grasping what was happening.

As the Boss came up close to the woman his shoulder was gripped by an American worker nicknamed "Gold Pouch"—the only gay fellow on the plantation. He had once worked in the gold fields, and liked to tell how the prospectors carried their gold dust in leather pouches, for which he was dubbed "Gold Pouch."

"Boss," said Gold Pouch, "you're a stinking hound and it's time I settled accounts with you in the white way for this yellow woman."

He pointed to the Chinese woman.

"Better order your death certificate first," replied the Boss, rolling up his sleeves.

Gold Pouch removed his straw hat, rapidly clenched and unclenched his fists several times, and suddenly struck the Boss a swift, terrible blow on the bridge of the nose. The Boss fell never to rise: he was killed outright.

Gold Pouch disappeared. That evening policemen in broad-brimmed felt hats arrived. The Chinese woman was arrested and all the field hands were fired.

Vanya and the Malayan hiked to the port of Brisbane to seek their fortune.

Seek his fortune! Every now and then during the past few years Vanya had recalled Grandad Twanger's words:



"Let him taste misery and seek his fortune!" But fortune had remained behind in his homeland. Once, not long before the *Lan-Su* ran aground, Captain Xidios had called Vanya to his cabin and said:

"John, do you know what's going on in your potato country?"

"A war," replied Vanya.

"Idiot!" snapped the captain. "The war's over. It raised a stink all over the world and then faded out. A revolution is going on in your country. Toilet cleaners are being made ministers. Maybe your esteemed father is already sitting in an office with a telephone and is drinking kvass with caviar."

"My father's dead," Vanya said softly. "Better leave him alone."

"Talking back, are you, stoker!" exclaimed the captain in a solemn voice, and hiccupped (he was drunk as usual). "You'll stand two watches for that. Who's barging into the revolution? Who?" he shouted. "The Astrakhan muzhik, the people without a history! They should learn from the Greeks. We fought for freedom like lions!"

"You fought but lost," said Vanya. "Your business is speculating in lemons."

"Get out of here, you bandit!" Xidios said mournfully. "Why has God punished me with a stinking crew on this old Chinese sieve?"

Xidios dropped his head on the table and started to snuffle. Vanya went out. That was how he first heard about the revolution. He began to read the newspapers avidly. He lay awake nights thinking about the revolution. Had his mother's dreams really come true, and were they already giving the poor folk good land back home?

At night, in the stuffy forecastle impregnated with the strong odour of sweat, he thought about the revolution and his homeland; fortune, he reflected, had remained behind, in Russia, and he had fled from it and had experienced nothing but wearisome years of hunger, hard labour and humiliation during this foolish flight from fortune.

In Brisbane, Vanya and the Malayan spent several nights in a park near the port. There was no work to be had.



The Australian winter held sway. The ocean roared over the reefs. Now and again Vanya would nibble some popcorn that an old woman, a bootblack, gave him.

The winds blew, and then the rains set in. At night Vanya and the Malayan took shelter on the porch of a summer restaurant, which was closed for the winter. The wind lashed at their faces with heavy drops of rain and fallen leaves. It raged over the ocean and hurled mountains of murky water against the moles. The spray beat against the earth and formed cold puddles. Salt water squelched in their torn boots and ate into their toil-worn feet until they bled.

On the fifth night Vanya became feverish. The ocean and sky changed places and swept overhead in torrents of black water, stars and smoke. He sat on the porch, rocking and singing:

*"A storm was raging; thunder rolled  
And lightning glittered in the night."*

The Malayan grew alarmed and began to cry. Then he ran and called a policeman, and in the morning Vanya was taken to the hospital.

He lay there two months with typhoid fever. All that time he was tormented by one and the same nightmare: Grandad Twanger came to the hospital and stood there sniggering as he pounded the toothy grey fish in his mortar.

"Go as a stowaway!" he yelled. "Stowaway it around the world, go and seek your fortune!"

"Why did you kill my father?" Vanya asked him.

"I didn't kill him," Grandad shouted. "The podsol killed him! There was no room on the barren land for the muzhiks to move round. The people died from land hunger like crabs of the water plague."

"Please go away, Grandad," Vanya pleaded.

"Where do you want me to go?" shouted Grandad. "I've no place to go: they've grabbed up all the quacks, hacked them right under the root. That's why we're wandering about in this foreign land of Australia and begging for the love of Christ from the godless English."

Then Grandad forced Vanya's mouth open and poured the prickly poison-fish powder down his throat.



Vanya yelled and twisted and knocked the glass of water out of his nurse's hand.

Vanya left the hospital early in spring. The sun was already making itself felt, and light breezes blew from the ocean in warm and steady streams, veiling the port streets with the sulphuric smoke of ships.

He found work: one of the hospital doctors offered him the job of digging up vegetable and flower beds in his large garden.

Vanya dug slowly and sat down frequently to wait until his head would stop swimming. The doctor's little son brought Vanya his lunch and a pack of cheap cigarettes. The boy was especially proud of the fact that his mother had entrusted him with bringing such a forbidden thing as tobacco to the gardener. He never gave Vanya the cigarettes at once. He would draw them out very slowly and mysteriously and hand them over with a broad grin.

While Vanya dug, the boy stood nearby and, fixing his bent back with a concentrated stare, plied him with endless questions about Russia. The stories Vanya told all sounded like a wonderful fairy tale to the boy.

Every morning the boy's mother, a slim, handsome woman, read to him out of a big book. Vanya, digging at his beds by the terrace, listened too.

The book told the sad story of a sailor who wandered over the earth in search of a lost tobacco pouch. The scene changed from oceans to primeval forests, from forests to arid deserts, from deserts to wild mountain peaks, from mountains to gay, noisy towns.

The sailor met many people—some loud and derisive, others timid and hospitable, and still others aggressive and short-tempered, but none could help him find his precious pouch. And the queer sailor just could not live without that tattered pouch of his. Then a freckle-faced little schoolgirl advised him to return home and see if he hadn't left the pouch on the bench by his bed, where he usually put his rough clothes at night. The sailor returned home and found the pouch. There was just enough tobacco in it for one pipeful. The threshold of his cottage was overgrown with tall grass. The grass swayed and bowed to the sailor—it was



glad to see this obstinate fellow come home; and the sailor stepped carefully over the grass, so as not to crush it.

The book ended with the words:

"We derive brief pleasure from an alien sky and alien lands, despite all their beauty. Finally the time comes when a lone daisy at the side of the road leading to one's home will appear to us lovelier than the starry firmament over the Pacific Ocean, and the crowing of the neighbour's cock will sound like the voice of the homeland, calling us back to its misty fields and forests."

Vanya sat down on the ground and carefully began to scrape the mud from his spade with a little stick. He strained his ears, but the voice on the terrace had fallen silent.

Ants crawled one after another along the grey trunk of a tree, and Vanya recalled the ant tracks in the pine woods near Pilyevo, and the thickets of heather and spindle, and the trumpeting of the cranes under his native sky, with its wisps of evening clouds.

Vanya picked up an ant on his stick. It was dark blue in colour, and enormous in size. It immediately reared up on its hind legs and made ready to bite his hand.

Vanya threw down the stick and broke into tears. He could not check his tears—they kept streaming down his sunken, unshaven cheeks, dropping onto his hands, onto the shovel, onto the vicious blue ants. As he cried, Vanya thought that he could go on crying for days, for a whole week on end, so heavy had his heart become. His nostalgia he had shared with nobody—indeed, there was nobody to share it with.

When the boy brought Vanya his lunch, he found him still in tears. The boy's lips began to tremble, but he controlled himself.

"I know everything," he said sternly. "That redheaded girl was nasty to you."

Vanya shook his head and surreptitiously wiped away his tears.

"No," he said in a spiritless voice. "It's just like that. . . ."

"Nothing is ever 'just like that,'" the boy repeated sternly, as he had heard grownups say thousands of times.

"Well, you see . . ." said Vanya. "I just remembered



about all sorts of things, about my country. It's very, very far away."

The boy cautiously set the pot of soup on the ground and ran into the house. He did not return for a long time. Vanya began to eat the soup. Tears still trickled down his cheeks, but he felt a little better.

The boy came running back all flushed with excitement and thrust a small bit of pasteboard into Vanya's hand. It was an old, used boat ticket.

"It's a real one," the boy said confidentially. "Mother travelled to London on it. She gave it to me and said that when I grow up I can also go to London on it. I hid it behind the stove. Take it."

"What do I want it for?" asked Vanya.

"Take it," repeated the boy. His lips began to tremble again. "And go back home. A grownup is not supposed to cry. A boat leaves tomorrow. I read it in the papers."

Vanya stood up. He wanted to say something to the boy, but the words would not come. Tenderly he ruffled the boy's warm hair. Then he planted the spade carefully in the ground and walked out of the garden. The gate slammed shut. Vanya listened. All was quiet behind it.

He spent another month in Brisbane, starving and earning the pennies to pay for a ticket to the neighbouring port—he had to get away from Brisbane where he risked an accidental meeting with the boy. The youngster was certain that Vanya had gone back home on his used, punched ticket, and Vanya did not want to disappoint him. He hid from the boy as a tramp hides from policemen.

It was only a month later that he left for Batavia, and from there he made his way to London—now as a stowaway, now as a deck passenger, now as a ship's hand assigned to cleaning out the toilets. In London he was taken aboard a Soviet ship which sailed for Leningrad.

Vanya returned to his native land in the autumn. That year the autumn was dry and clear. The earth was resting after giving forth a rich, bountiful harvest; it seemed to slumber in the blue mists to the gentle rustle of the forests. Its breath was pure, a balm to the wounds inflicted in the past.



In Pilyevo Vanya got a job on the narrow-gauge railroad as a locomotive engineer's assistant. He talked eagerly with people, studied everything that was happening around him, and even in every little trifle sensed a manifestation of the remarkable life of this seemingly familiar yet new homeland of his; he noted thousands of signs of happiness flowering in the once barren fields and in the once impoverished villages.

One Sunday Vanya and Kuzma Petrovich, the locomotive engineer, a little old man all shiny with grease, set out for the Boroviye lakes to fish. As a boy he used to visit these lakes, and each time he returned home Darya, his mother, had swung the horse reins at him and screamed:

"Look at him, the crooked-mouthed little gentleman! The horse hasn't been watered or fed, and he goes gallivanting about the lakes!"

Darya was long dead. And so was Grandad Twanger. The old cemetery where they were buried had been ploughed up and sown to clover. Now bumblebees were droning amid the clover. They soared up from the grass and hit against the boarded windows of the church with little pops. The church was inhabited by lean old spiders. They had spun their webs all over the windows and sat for hours in a torpor by the dried flies hanging in their webs.

It was a long way to the lakes. The air was misty that day, and the earth lay strewn with dry birch leaves. Tomtits chirped; cranes trumpeted over the tops of pines. Vanya recognized the old spots: the abandoned forest paths that led into aspen groves, the lanes overgrown with heather, everlasting and spiked grasses, and the ant tracks in the reddish grainy sand.

Stillness reigned over the woodland—that peculiar autumn stillness when even a spider web seems to tinkle as it floats over a glade.

On the way they stopped into Vanya's native village. In his cottage now lived the forester and his family. A young girl in a blue sarafan came out to Vanya. Two long, dark braids hung over her shoulders, and she kept fingering them in embarrassment.

"There's nobody at home," she said, lifting her calm



clear eyes to Vanya's face. "Father's in the forest, and Mother's gone to the collective-farm fair in town. Come in, please."

Vanya stepped forward and halted in the doorway. There were flowers on the window sills, on the table, and even on the bunk on which his father had died. The sunlight fell on a homespun tablecloth and a book lying open upon it. The room was redolent of dry bread and apples.

Vanya picked up the book—it was a botany textbook.

"It's a textbook," smiled the girl. "I only spend the summer here; in the winter I attend school in town."

Vanya had gathered some flowers in the forest on the way. As he picked them he had tried to recall their names. He showed the flowers to the girl and admitted with remorse that he had forgotten his Russian and could not remember their names. The girl spread the flowers out on the table and began slowly to list them: lungwort, rosebay, daisy, gentian, willow herb.

As he looked at her, Vanya kept thinking that she must be Zina, the neighbour's girl. She was three years old when he left, and he remembered her as a scabby little thing crawling over the floor, all covered with hen's droppings, and her mother slapping her away from the pig trough.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he asked.

The girl glanced at him shyly and shook her head.

"No, I don't think so. Why? Do you come from here?"

Vanya did not reply. He left his flowers and went out. In a corner of the storm passage lay the cracked old mortar, now black with age, in which Grandad Twanger had pounded the healing powders for his father. For a long time afterward Vanya could not shake off the thought that his entire past life, like that of his mother and father, in some way resembled that awful wooden mortar in which poisonous, evil powders had been pounded for so many years.

The way to the lakes first lay through a woods. Then it crossed some dry bogs overgrown with low birches, alders, red bilberries and moss. The bogs were golden with autumn: yellow leaves fluttered down on the prickly, withered grass. The red dragonflies flitting over the grass, the midges swarming in columns, the clouds slowly rising



higher and higher and finally merging with the sky—all these pointed to a warm and dry autumn. Here and there among the bogs, like islands, stood pine woods. The pines grew on sandy mounds. The floor of the woods—it was the very same ash-grey podsol that had started all of Vanya's misfortunes—was covered with ferns and lilies of the valley.

In one of the pine woods Kuzma Petrovich pointed out to Vanya the fresh spoor of an elk. The elk had been galloping in the direction of the lakes—it must have been in a hurry to get to the water. At sundown, when the huge sun was setting quietly beyond the oceans of autumnal forests, Vanya and Kuzma Petrovich reached the wooded island on which the five Boroviye lakes were situated. The water gave off a nocturnal coolness. A lone bright star twinkled over the forests and was mirrored in the depths of the lakes.

Vanya came to a stop on the hill overlooking the lakes, and a lump rose in his throat, as it had that time in the doctor's garden in Brisbane. He thought of the little boy and the stories he had told him about his homeland, and he realized that it was a hundred times more beautiful than he had ever imagined it to be from afar.

Vanya did not sleep that night; he sat at the campfire and listened to the night sounds. He recognized the hooting of owls, the whistles of bats, the drowsy flapping of fish in the deeps of the lakes. The darker the night became, the brighter grew the heavens. Before dawn Sirius rose and slowly threw its piercing green light over the damp woods, where an animal was crying mournfully, as though calling to someone.

Kuzma Petrovich awoke and listened.

"An elk's crying," he said.

On the way back Vanya visited his old home again. There he found a spry little old woman in tiny bast shoes—Auntie Vasilisa. He had completely forgotten about her. But she remembered him well.

"Vanyatka!" she exclaimed, kissing him and bustling around the table. "Goodness me! Everybody's been saying for years now that you perished at the other end of the world, that you disappeared in the warm seas. I keep remembering



your Pa, Ignat. Such a meek one, he was—he'd even hold back a cough so as not to disturb a person! There he was, lying on his bunk and dying. I used to come to him and say: 'Maybe you'd like me to bake you a rye bun or bring some huckleberries to eat with your tea, Ignatushka? It might ease the pain.' And he'd say: 'Don't trouble yourself, Vasilisa. I should have built myself a good life, as bright as a brand-new cottage, but I didn't—our hands, the hands of us muzhiks, are too stiff with manure. . . .' And then he'd say: 'There is a land, Vasilisa, that has still, clear waters, and wheat in the fields that bends to the very ground—so heavy are its ears, and the people there sing songs that are as happy as their lives. And now I'm dying, without seeing that land. My Vanya will see it, and when he does he will surely remember his father.' Then he died, did Ignat, without seeing a different life. And Darya, you know, died just before the revolution. She'd caught a cold. Running she had been all winter to Pilyevo for letters from you, but you didn't write. I remember her saying: 'My Vanyatka's gone so far away his letters can't reach me. Why did I have to chase him off to Siberia, fool that I am?'"

Vanya rose. It made his heart heavy to listen to Vasilisa's singsong tale of the past. The girl in the blue sarafan entered, blushed, and shook Vanya's hand in greeting.

"This is my daughter," said the old woman with pride. "I don't suppose you remember Zina here, do you? She was a little snorter then, and now she's studying right in Moscow."

"Oh, Mom!" the girl said reproachingly, and blushed a deeper red. She glanced shyly at Vanya and pointed to a glass; a bunch of forest flowers stood in it—Vanya's gift. "See, the flowers have faded in your absence," she said sadly. "I changed the water twice but they just keep on fading."

"Do flowers yearn for somebody too?" asked the old woman with a laugh.

Several days later Vanya mailed a letter with a strange address: "Australia, City of Brisbane."

The postal clerk examined the letter a long time: something rustled inside. He held it up against the light and discerned the outline of a red maple leaf. The postal clerk could not figure it out, but he stamped the letter with extra care:



let those people in Australia know that there existed a station called Pilyevo, nestling deep in the Russian forests.

This is what the letter said:

"Thanks, Bob, for your ticket. It turned out to be a real, genuine ticket. I had a separate cabin, with hot water and flowers, and music played all the way, and we were fed apple puddings, and I kept remembering you. See you don't forget me while you're growing up, because when you do grow up, you must come and visit me and let me show you the country where everything is done so that people have less sorrow and more happiness in the future. I'm sending you a leaf from our woods. Our woods are all red; you've never seen the like. Not long ago I went to the deep lakes in the woods and saw the tracks of a forest animal—the elk. It looks like a huge horse, only it has horns. Write to me and I will write back. Give your mother my regards—tell her it's from John. He's the sailor who travelled all over the world hunting for his tobacco pouch. Tell your mother that I too found my pouch at home.

"Goodbye, study well, be happy and strong.

"Yours,

John Zubov."



## SNOW

OLD POTAPOV died a month after Tatyana Petrovna moved into his house. Tatyana Petrovna remained alone there with her daughter Varya and the child's old nurse.

The little three-room house stood on a hill at the town limits, overlooking the northern river. Beyond the house and the now naked garden gleamed a white birch grove. Jackdaws cawed there from morning to night, soaring in swarms over the bare treetops and calling down gloomy weather on the town.

After Moscow it had taken Tatyana Petrovna some time to grow accustomed to the deserted little town with its slant-roofed little houses and its creaking wicket gates, to the evenings when it was so still that you could hear the flame sputtering in the kerosene lamp.

"What a fool I was!" Tatyana Petrovna had thought. "Why did I leave Moscow, why did I give up the theatre and my friends! I could have sent Varya out to her nurse's place in Pushkino—there weren't any air raids there—and remained behind in Moscow myself. My God, what a fool I was!"

But now it was too late to return to Moscow. Tatyana Petrovna decided to give performances in the army hospitals—there were several of them in the town—and calmed down. She even began to grow fond of the town, especially when winter came and smothered it in snow. The days were mild and grey. The river did not freeze for a long time; vapours kept rising from its green waters.

Tatyana Petrovna had grown used both to the little town and to the stranger's house. She had grown used to the piano that was out of tune, and to the yellowed pho-



tographs of cumbersome armoured coast guard ships pinned up on the wall. Old Potapov had once been a ship's mechanic. On the faded green baize of his desk stood a model of the cruiser *Gromoboi*, on which he had served. Varya was not allowed to touch it. As a matter of fact, she was not allowed to touch anything.

Tatyana Petrovna knew that Potapov had a son, a naval officer now serving in the Black Sea Fleet. There was a picture of him on the desk, next to the model of the cruiser. Sometimes Tatyana Petrovna would pick it up, examine it, and frown thoughtfully. She felt she had seen that face somewhere long, long ago, before her unsuccessful marriage. But where? And when?

The sailor gazed at her with calm, slightly mocking eyes, as though he were chiding her: "Well, how about it? Can't you remember where we met?"

"No, I can't," Tatyana Petrovna would reply very quietly.

"Mummie, who are you talking to?" Varya would call from the next room.

"To the piano," Tatyana Petrovna would laugh in answer.

In the middle of the winter letters addressed to Potapov began to stream in, all written in the same hand. Tatyana Petrovna stacked them up on the desk.

One night she suddenly awoke. The snow was casting a faint sheen on the windowpanes. The grey tomcat Arkhip, Potapov's legacy, was napping on the couch.

Tatyana Petrovna put on her bathrobe, went into Potapov's study and stood there at the window. A bird swept some snow off a bough as it flew out of a tree. The snow floated down in a fine white dust and filmed the window.

Tatyana Petrovna lit the candle on the desk and sank into an armchair. She gazed at the flame for a long time—it was burning without even the slightest flicker. Then she carefully picked up one of the letters, opened it, and, glancing round, began to read.

"Dear Pa," Tatyana Petrovna read. "I've been in hospital a month now. My wound is not a very serious one, and it's healing well. Please don't you start worrying and smoking cigarette after cigarette. Please!



"I often think of you," Tatyana Petrovna read on, "and of our house and our little town. It all seems far, far away, at the other end of the world. I close my eyes and see myself opening the gate and entering the garden. It is winter and there is snow on the ground, but the path has been cleared to the harbour overlooking the precipice. The lilac bushes are all covered with hoarfrost. Inside the house the stoves are crackling. There is a smell of birchwood smoke. The piano has at long last been tuned and you have put the yellow candles—the ones I brought from Leningrad—in the candlesticks. The same music lies on the piano: the overture to *The Queen of Spades*, and *For the Shores of My Distant Land*. Does the door bell ring? I didn't get a chance to fix it before I left. Will I really see it all again? Will I really use the blue jug for my wash when I get back? Remember? Ah, if you only knew how I have grown to love all this from afar! Don't be surprised when I tell you in all seriousness that I used to recall all that during the most difficult moments of battle. I knew that I was defending not only my country as a whole but also that little corner dearest to my heart—you, our garden, our mischievous little boys, the birch groves beyond the river, and even our tomcat Arkhip. Please don't laugh and don't shake your head.

"I may be able to come home for a short leave after my discharge from hospital. But I don't know yet. Better don't expect me."

Tatyana Petrovna sat at the desk for a long time, staring fixedly out of the window at the dawn spreading over the dark blueness outside. She was reflecting that any day now a strange man, evidently a calm, courageous person, might arrive from the front, and that it would be difficult for him to bear the sight of strangers living in the house and to find everything quite different from what he had been looking forward to.

In the morning Tatyana Petrovna told Varya to take a wooden shovel and clear the path to the harbour overlooking the precipice. The harbour was a ramshackle affair. Its wooden columns had turned grey and were overgrown with lichen. The doorbell Tatyana Petrovna fixed herself. It bore the amusing legend: "I hang at the door, so ring some more!"



She rang the bell. It gave a high-pitched tinkle. Arkhip twitched his ears with displeasure, and, taking this as a personal affront, stalked out of the entrance hall. To his mind the merry tinkle was obviously nothing short of outrageous.

Later in the day Tatyana Petrovna, flushed and vivacious, her eyes sparkling with excitement, brought an old piano tuner in from town, a Russianized Czech who tuned pianos when he wasn't repairing primus and kerosene stoves, dolls and harmonicas. He had a very funny name: Nevidal. When he finished, the Czech said that the piano was an old instrument but a very good one. Tatyana Petrovna was aware of that herself.

After he had gone, Tatyana Petrovna glanced carefully into all the drawers of the desk until she found a package of thick yellow candles. She put two of them in the candlesticks on the piano. In the evening she lit the candles and sat down at the piano, and the house became filled with sound.

When she finished playing and blew out the candles, a fir-tree incense spread through the room.

Varya could not contain herself any longer.

"Why do you touch other people's things?" she said. "You won't let me, but you touch them yourself! You've touched the bell, and the candles, and the piano. And you put somebody else's music on the piano."

"Because I'm a grownup," said Tatyana Petrovna.

Varya pouted and glanced at her with disbelief. Just then Tatyana Petrovna looked least of all like a grownup. She was all pink and radiant and looked more like the girl with the golden hair who lost her glass slipper in the palace. Tatyana Petrovna herself had told Varya about that girl.

While still in the train Lieutenant Potapov had figured out that he could not spend more than twenty-four hours at home. His leave was very short, and the road ate away almost all of it.

The train arrived in the afternoon. At the station the lieutenant learned from the stationmaster, an old acquaintance, that his father had died a month before and that a young Moscow singer and her daughter were living in his house.

"Evacuees," the stationmaster explained.



put his hand on the rickety rail. In the distance, beyond the forest the sky was tinged pink—the moon, evidently, was rising behind the clouds. He took off his cap and passed his hand through his hair. It was very quiet. Only below, at the foot of the hill, women were clattering their empty pails as they went to the ice hole for water.

Potapov leaned his elbows on the rail and clasped his head between his hands.

"How could it have happened?" he murmured.

He felt a light touch on his shoulder and turned to face a pale, grave young woman with a warm kerchief on her head. She looked at him in silence. Snowflakes were melting on her cheeks—she had probably brushed past a bough.

"Put on your cap," she said softly. "Or else you will catch cold. And come into the house. You mustn't stand here."

Potapov said nothing. The woman took his hand and led him along the cleared path. Near the porch he stopped. A spasm had gripped his throat and he could not breathe. The woman said in the same soft voice:

"It's all right. And please don't take any notice of me. It'll soon pass."

She stamped her feet to shake the snow off her boots, causing the little bell to tinkle and resound through the entrance hall. Potapov took a deep breath.

He entered the house, muttering something in his confusion, and took his coat off in the hall; a smell of birchwood smoke assailed his nostrils. He saw Arkhip sitting on the couch and yawning. Near the couch stood a little girl with pigtails, gazing with delighted eyes at Potapov; she was not looking at his face, though, but at the gold stripes on his sleeve.

"Come along," said Tatyana Petrovna. She ushered Potapov into the kitchen.

There was the blue jug filled with cold water and the familiar linen towel embroidered with green oak leaves.

Tatyana Petrovna went out. The little girl brought Potapov a cake of soap and watched him while he washed. Potapov still felt embarrassed.

"Who is your mummie?" he asked the girl, reddening.



Potapov said nothing. He gazed through the window at the passengers in padded jackets and felt boots scurrying up and down the platform with teakettles. His heart sank and he grew dizzy.

"Aye," said the stationmaster. "He was a good soul. Didn't live to see his boy come home."

"When can I get a train back?" Potapov inquired.

"At five in the morning." The stationmaster paused and then added, "You can stay the night over with me. My old woman will give you some supper. There's no need for you to go home."

"Thanks," said Potapov. He went out.

He forgot his suitcase in the stationmaster's office. The stationmaster shook his head as he gazed after him.

Potapov walked across town to the river. Over it spread a blue-grey sky. A light snow was slanting down between sky and earth. Jackdaws hopped about the dung in the road. Twilight was deepening. A wind blew from the woods on the opposite bank; it whipped tears into his eyes.

"Well!" said Potapov. "I'm too late. And now all this seems alien somehow—the town, and the river, and the forest, and the house."

He turned and gazed at the distant precipice beyond the town. There they stood—the frost-covered garden and the house. Smoke was curling up from the chimney. The wind carried the smoke to the birch grove.

Potapov walked slowly in the direction of the house. He decided not to go in but only to walk past it, and perhaps enter the garden and stand for a moment in the old arbour. He could not bear the thought that strangers who cared nothing for him and his father were living in his father's house. It would be better not to see anything, not to torment himself—to leave and to forget the past.

"Well," thought Potapov, "you grow older as you go along and learn to see things with harder eyes."

He reached the house at dusk. He opened the gate carefully, but it creaked just the same. The white garden seemed to have given a start. A lump of snow fell rustling from a bough. Potapov turned round. The path leading to the arbour was cleared of snow. He went over to the arbour and



evidently reading. He gathered that she was sitting up so that she could wake him in time for the train. He wanted to tell her that he was not sleeping either, but he dared not call out.

At four o'clock Tatyana Petrovna quietly opened the door and called to him. He stirred.

"Time to get up," she said. "I do hate to wake you up so early!"

Tatyana Petrovna saw Potapov to the station through the sleeping town. They said goodbye after the second bell. Tatyana Petrovna held both hands out to him.

"Write to me," she said. "We are almost relatives now, aren't we?"

Potapov said nothing. He only nodded his head.

Several days later Tatyana Petrovna received a letter from Potapov, written on the way:

"I hadn't forgotten, of course, where we met, but I didn't feel like talking about it back there, at home. Remember the Crimea in the autumn of 1927? And the old plane trees in the park in Livadia? A dimming sky, a pale sea. I was walking along the path toward Oreanda. On the way I came upon a girl seated on a bench by the path. She must have been about sixteen. She saw me, got up and walked toward me. As we came to a level I glanced at her. She passed by quickly and lightly; she held an open book in her hand. I stopped and gazed after her for a long time. That girl was you. I could not have been mistaken. I gazed after you and felt cold all over. It struck me then that a woman who could either ruin my whole life or make me happy had walked past me. I felt that I could have loved that woman to distraction, blessed her every step, her every word, her every smile. I knew then and there that I must find you at all costs. This is what I thought, standing there, but I did not move from the spot. Why—I do not know. Ever since then I have loved the Crimea, and that path where I saw you for only a fleeting moment and lost you forever. But life has been kind to me. I met you again. And if everything ends well and you should want my life, it is yours, of course. Oh yes, I found my opened letter on father's desk. I understood all and can only thank you from afar."



He had asked the question just for the sake of saying something.

"She thinks she's a grownup," the girl said in a mysterious whisper. "But she isn't at all. She's even a worse girl than I am."

"Why?" asked Potapov.

The girl did not reply. She laughed and ran out of the kitchen.

All evening long Potapov could not shake off the strange sensation that he was living in a gossamer, but very sound, dream. Everything in the house was just as he had hoped to find it. The same music lay on the piano. The same yellow candles sputtered as they illuminated his father's small study. Even the letters he had written from the hospital lay on the desk—lay there under the same old compass, where his father had always placed his letters.

After tea Tatyana Petrovna took Potapov to his father's grave, beyond the grove. A hazy moon had risen high in the heavens. The birches gleamed in its light, casting soft shadows on the snow.

Then, late in the evening, Tatyana Petrovna sat down at the piano. Running her fingers lightly over the keys, she turned to Potapov and said:

"I have a feeling that I've seen you somewhere before."

"So have I," answered Potapov.

He looked at her. The candlelight fell slantwise, lighting up half her face. Potapov rose, paced the room and came to a stop.

"No, my memory fails me," he said in a husky voice.

Tatyana Petrovna turned and shot an alarmed glance at Potapov, but she did not say anything in reply.

Potapov's bed was made up on the couch in the study. He could not fall asleep. Each minute in this house was precious, and he was loth to lose a single one. He lay listening to Arkhip's stealthy steps, to the ticking of the clock, to Tatyana Petrovna whispering something to the nurse in the next room. Then the voices died away and the nurse went out, but the strip of light under the door remained. Potapov heard the rustle of page - Tatyana Petrovna was



Tatyana Petrovna put away the letter and stared with filmy eyes at the snowy garden outside the window.

"My God!" she murmured. "I never was in the Crimea in my life, never! But can that make any difference now? And is it worth disillusioning him? Or myself!"

She broke into a short laugh and then covered her eyes with her hand. Beyond the window a lacklustre sunset glowed faintly; somehow its light could not fade out.



## A NIGHT IN OCTOBER

PERSONALLY, I find it far easier to write in the country than in town. In the country everything furthers concentration: even the sputtering of the small kerosene lamp and the moaning of the wind in the garden—and then, in between these sounds, there is that complete hush when the earth seems to have come to a standstill and to hang soundlessly in mid-cosmos.

And so, late in the autumn of 1945, I left town to work in a village beyond Ryazan. There was a country house there, with a garden that was completely overgrown. Its mistress was an old lady named Vasilisa Ionovna, a retired Ryazan librarian. I had been there previously, and upon each new visit had found the garden wilder and the house and its mistress more aged.

I left Moscow on the last boat of the season. Rust-coloured banks meandered along outside the windows of my cabin, and grey little waves sent out by the paddle wheels lapped up against them. In the saloon a small red bulb burned all night long. I felt as though I was alone on that boat; the passengers seldom left their warm cabins. Only a lame sapper captain with a weather-beaten countenance and narrowed eyes prowled about the deck and gazed smilingly at the banks. They were ready for winter: the leaves had long since been shed, the grass lay flat, the potherbs had turned black, and little white wisps of smoke curled over the cottages of the near-lying villages—the stoves were already being heated everywhere. The river too was ready for winter. Almost all the wharves had been shifted to the back waters. The buoys had been removed, and it was only thanks to the grey moonlight sheathing the earth that our boat was able to proceed at night.



I struck up a conversation with the sapper captain to our mutual delight and satisfaction. It appeared that Captain Zuyev was also getting off at Novoselki and that he, like myself, intended to cross over to the other bank of the Oka and go to the village of Zaborye by way of the meadows. Our boat was due to arrive in Novoselki that evening.

"I'm not stopping at Zaborye, however," the captain informed me. "I'll push on a bit farther to the forestry out there; but we can go together to Zaborye. I've been to the front and have seen a thing or two in my life, and still I don't quite fancy plodding through those deserted places at night by myself. Before the war I was a forester, and now that I've been demobbed I'm going back to the old job. It's quite a wonderful job—looking after those forests! I'm a graduate silviculturist. Come and visit me. I'll show you some spots that will take your breath away. At the front I dreamt about them almost every night."

He laughed, and his face grew visibly younger.

When the boat docked at Novoselki late in the evening, there was nobody on the wharf but the watchman with his lantern. Zuyev and I were the only passengers to go ashore. No sooner had we stepped off the damp gangplank than the boat got under way, enveloping us in a cloud of steam. The watchman with the lantern departed at once, leaving us to our own resources.

"Let's not hurry," said Zuyev. "We might as well sit down on a log, have a smoke and figure out what to do next."

Judging by his voice, by the way he drew in the smell of the river water, by the way he glanced about him and laughed when the boat gave a short whistle as it rounded a bend, and the night echo picked up the sound and rolled it on and on until it drifted away into the forests beyond the Oka—judging by all this, I could see that Zuyev was in no special hurry for the simple reason that he was experiencing an extraordinary and unexpected joy at finding himself in this familiar place to which he had almost lost hope of returning.

We had our smoke and then made our way up the steep bank to the lodge of the beacon-keeper Sofron. I tapped on the window. Sofron came out so quickly that I doubted



whether he had been asleep. He recognized me and we shook hands.

"The water's been rising today," he said. "All of two metres during the last twenty-four hours. Looks like it's raining higher up. Did you hear tell of it?"

"No."

Sofron yawned.

"Autumn, nothing to be done about it. Well, shall we cross?"

At night the Oka seemed to be very broad, much broader than by day. The current was strong along the entire width of the river. Fish were splashing about here and there, and in the faint moonlight we could see how the rings formed by the splashes were swiftly carried along by the current and stretched out of shape.

At length we reached the opposite bank. The meadows gave off the smell of withered grass and the sweetish scent of willow leaves. We walked along a barely visible path and soon came to a country road. It was very quiet. The moon was sailing earthward; its light was already on the wane.

We next had to negotiate a meadow island about six kilometres wide, cross an old bridge spanning a second, very still and overgrown, bed of the Oka, and then, beyond a stretch of sand lay Zaborye.

"I recognize it all," said the captain agitatedly, "every little landmark. It seems I haven't forgotten a thing. See that cluster of trees? Those are the willows on the Prorva. Am I right? I told you so! Look at the mist over Lake Selyana! And not a bird to be heard. I've come too late, of course—the birds have all flown off. And the air! What air it is, mother of mine! Perfumed all autumn by the grasses. I've never breathed such air anywhere else. Can you hear the cocks crowing? That's in Trebutino. Lusty devils they are! You can hear them four kilometres away!"

The farther we went, however, the less we spoke, and soon we stopped talking altogether. An opaqueness lay over the creeks, the black haystacks and the clumps of bushes. The silence of the night had communicated itself to us.

On our right spread a reed-choked lake whose surface gave off a dull gleam. Zuyev found it hard to walk because



of his bad foot. We sat down on a wind-felled willow to rest. I knew that willow well—it had been lying there for several years now and was all covered with low-growing eglantine.

"Life!" sighed Zuyev. "All in all, life is good. I've been appreciating it doubly ever since the war ended. You can laugh if you like, but now I could spend the rest of my life growing pine trees. Absolutely. Am I talking nonsense? What?"

"On the contrary," I said. "Not at all. Have you a family?"

"No, I'm an old bachelor."

We continued on our way. The moon hid beyond the steep bank of the Oka. Dawn was still far ahead. In the east the gloom was still as dense as in the other parts of the sky. We found walking more and more difficult.

"There's one thing I can't understand," said Zuyev, "and that is why they've stopped bringing the horses out for night grazing. They used to keep them out at night all the way up to the first snowfall. And now there isn't a single horse in the meadows."

I had noticed this also but had not attached any significance to it. The meadow all around was so desolate that there seemed to be no other living creatures on it but ourselves.

Presently I made out a broad strip of water ahead of us. It hadn't been there before. I peered into the darkness and my heart missed a beat—was the old bed of the Oka flooded as badly as that?

"The bridge will soon heave in sight," Zuyev said gaily. "And beyond that lies Zaborye. We can say we've practically arrived."

At the bank of the old channel the road led right into the black water. The water lay there at our feet, lapping against the low bank. There were dull splashes here and there as sections of the bank caved in.

"Where's the bridge?" Zuyev asked anxiously.

There was no bridge. It had either been washed away or flooded by a layer of a metre and a half or two of water. Zuyev switched on his flashlight. We saw muddy waves and the swaying tops of bushes jutting out of them.



"We-e-ll!" said the puzzled Zuyev. "It looks like we're cut off. By water. Now I understand why the meadows are so deserted. It looks like we're the only ones here. This wants some thinking over."

He fell silent.

"Shall we shout, eh?"

But it was no use shouting. Zaborye was still quite a distance away. And in any case nobody would have heard us. Besides, I knew that there was not a single rowboat in Zaborye to take us off the island. The ferry had been set up about two kilometres downstream, by the Pustini Forest.

"I suppose we'll have to go down to the ferry," I said. "Of course—"

"Of course what?"

"Oh, nothing. I know the way."

I had been about to say, "Of course, if the ferry is still there." But I had thought better of it. If the meadows were already deserted and they were being flooded by the autumn waters, then it stood to reason that the ferry had been removed. And Vasily the ferryman, that stern and sensible old fellow, would not be sitting in his tent for nothing.

"Oh well!" agreed Zuyev. "Come along, then. Look how dark the night's become, curse it!"

He switched the flashlight on again and let out an oath—the water had already covered the tops of the bushes.

"This is getting serious!" Zuyev muttered. "We'd better hurry."

We set out for the ferry. A wind blew up out of the darkness; it came slowly, with a hum, sweeping snowflakes before it. The splashes made by the collapsing bank grew more frequent. We plodded along, stumbling against roots and clumps of old grass. There were two small gullies which had always been dry. Now we waded across them up to our knees in water.

"The gullies are filling up," said Zuyev. "I hope we don't get caught in this. I just can't understand why the water is rising so fast!"

Not even during the heaviest autumn rains had the water risen so rapidly or flooded the island.



"I don't see any trees here," Zuyev remarked suddenly. "Nothing but bushes."

There was a cartroad at the crossing. We found it thanks to the mud and the smell of manure. The bank on the other side of the old channel was steep and covered with a pine forest now moaning in the wind.

The night kept growing darker and colder. The water was hissing. Zuyev switched his flashlight on again. The river was running at a level with the bank, and narrow tongues were streaming over on the meadow.

"Fer-r-ry!" Zuyev shouted. He listened. "Fer-r-ry!"

Nobody responded. The pines moaned.

We shouted for a long time, until we became hoarse, but nobody answered. The snow gave way to rain. Scattered drops began to drum heavily against the earth.

Again we shouted. The pines continued to moan indifferently.

"The ferryman's gone!" Zuyev said crossly. "That's clear enough! And why the devil should he be here when the island's being flooded and there's not a living soul on it? How ridiculous! A stone's throw from home...."

I realized that nothing but pure chance could save us: either the water would stop rising at once, or we would find an abandoned rowboat. Most terrifying of all was the fact that we did not know why the water was rising so rapidly. It was hair-raising to think that only an hour ago there had been not the slightest sign of this night predicament of ours, and that we had walked into it ourselves.

"Let's follow the bank," I proposed. "We might come across a rowboat."

We groped our way along the bank, skirting the flooded places. Zuyev used his flashlight, but it was growing dim. Finally he turned it off to save it for an extreme emergency.

I stumbled against something dark and soft. It turned out to be a small haystack. Zuyev put a match to it. The stack blazed up in crimson, lurid flames. The fire lit up the turbid river, the now flooded meadows stretching ahead as far as the eye could see, and even the pine forest on the opposite bank. The forest was swaying and moaning indifferently.



We stood at the burning haystack staring into the fire. Disconnected thoughts flashed through my mind. At first I felt sorry that I had not done a tenth of what I had intended to do in life. Then I reflected that it was stupid to perish of one's own folly at a time when life promised many more days like this, bleak and autumnal perhaps, but fresh and dear to the heart, when the first snow has not yet fallen but everything already smells of that snow—the air, the water, the trees and even the cabbage leaves.

Zuyev must have been ruminating along the same lines. He slowly drew a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and held it out to me. We took our light from the burning hay.

"It'll go out in a moment," Zuyev said softly. "The water's at our feet already."

I did not say anything. I was listening. Above the moaning of the forest and the splashing of the water I could hear faint, intermittent sounds. They came nearer and nearer. I turned to the river and called out:

"He-e-ey, rowboat! This way!"

A boyish voice responded at once from the river:

"I'm com-m-m-ing!"

Zuyev quickly poked the hay. A column of flame burst forth, shooting sparks into the darkness. Zuyev began to laugh softly.

"Oars!" he said. "Those are oars creaking. How could we have suspected for a moment that we might perish in this dear spot of ours?"

I was particularly stirred by that responsive cry of "I'm coming." I'm coming to your aid! I'm coming through the darkness toward the smouldering light of the campfire! The call harked the memory back to the ancient customs of brotherhood and aid, which had never died out among our people.

"Hey you, come down to the sand! This way!" a voice rang out from the river, and I suddenly realized that it was a woman's voice.

We hastened down to the water's edge. A rowboat suddenly drifted into the dim light of the fire and grounded its bow on the sand.



"Don't climb in yet, I've got to bail out some of this water," the voice said.

A woman jumped out of the boat and dragged it up on the bank. We could not see her face. She was wearing a padded jacket and boots, and her head was wrapped in a warm kerchief.

"Whatever brought you here?" she asked brusquely, without looking at us, as she began to bail.

She listened rather indifferently to our tale and then said in the same brusque tone:

"How come the beacon-keeper didn't tell you? They opened the sluices on the river yesterday. For the winter. The whole island will be flooded before morning."

"And how come you're in the forest at night, dear lifesaver of ours?" Zuyev asked playfully.

"I was on my way to work," the woman answered somewhat reluctantly. "From Pustini to Zaborye. I saw the fire and you people on this island here. So I guessed what had happened. The ferryman's been gone two days already; there was no reason for him to stay here any longer. I could hardly find the oars. They were under the hay in his tent."

I sat down at the oars and rowed as hard as I could, but it seemed to me that the boat, far from moving ahead, was being carried along toward a black waterfall down which all this muddy water and the gloom and the whole night were falling.

At last we reached the other bank. We climbed up the slope and stopped to have a smoke only when we had reached the forest.

The forest was very still and warm, and smelled of rotting leaves. Way above us there was a steady, majestic roar—the only reminder of the gloomy night and our recent danger. Now the night seemed wonderful and beautiful. And the face of the young woman seemed to me very pleasant and familiar in the brief glimmer of the match as we lit up. Her grey eyes regarded us shyly. Wet strands of hair peeped out of her kerchief.

"Is that really you, Dasha?" Zuyev suddenly asked in a very soft voice.



"Yes, Ivan Matveyevich." The woman burst into a light laugh, as though amused by something known to herself alone. "I recognized you at once. Only I didn't feel like telling you. We've been waiting for you all this time, ever since victory! We didn't want to believe that you wouldn't return to us."

"That's how it is!" said Zuyev. "I was at the front four years and came to grips with death many a time. And now it was Dasha who actually saved me from death. She's my assistant," he told me. "She works in the forestry. I taught her the job. She was a weak little thing, as slim as a stalk. And now look at what a beauty she's become! And she's grown stern, too."

"Oh no! I'm not at all stern," Dasha replied. "It's just the suddenness of it all. Are you going to Vasilisa Ionovna's? Dasha suddenly asked me, apparently to change the subject.

I answered yes, that I was going to Vasilisa Ionovna's, and invited the two of them to come along with me. We all wanted to dry ourselves and to rest in the warm old house.

Vasilisa Ionovna was not in the least surprised by our nocturnal arrival. She had reached the age when nothing surprised her any longer, and she gave her own interpretation to everything that happened. Now too, after hearing the story of our misadventure, she said:

"Great is the God of the land of Russia. And as for that Sofron, I always said he was unreliable. I just can't understand how you, a writer, didn't see through him! It only means that you have a blind spot for people too. Well," she said, turning to Dasha, "and I'm very glad for you. Your Ivan Matveyevich has finally come back."

Dasha reddened, jumped up, grabbed an empty bucket and ran out to the garden, forgetting to close the door behind her.

"Where to?" cried the startled Vasilisa Ionovna.

"To fetch water—for the samovar!" Dasha cried back.

"I can't understand the girls nowadays," said Vasilisa Ionovna, paying no heed to Zuyev, who somehow could not light his match. "You say something to them, and they blow up like fireworks. A wonderful girl, she is, though. In fact, she's my only comfort."



"Yes," agreed Zuyev, who had finally lit his match. "She's a wonderful girl."

Of course, Dasha dropped the bucket down the well. I know how to extract buckets from that well—with a pole. Dasha helped me. Her hands were ice-cold with agitation, and she kept repeating:

"Oh, how could Vasilisa Ionovna! How could she!"

The wind had blown away the storm clouds, and a starry sky was now flickering over the black garden. I pulled up the bucket. Dasha began to drink straight from it, her wet teeth gleaming in the darkness.

"Oh, goodness me," she said, "how can I go back now?"

"It's quite all right, come along."

We went back in. The lamps had already been lit and a clean cloth laid on the table. From his black frame on the wall Turgenev gazed down tranquilly upon the scene. A rare portrait, engraved on steel with the finest needle, it was Vasilisa Ionovna's pride.



## THE COWHERD

**T**HE DEW was cold and abundant—a real September dew.

It sprayed into my face as I brushed through the tall grass, and it dripped from the trees into the river, causing slow circles to spread over its dark surface.

I became soaked to the skin by this dew and built a campfire. The smoke rose to the tops of the larches and the firs. The larches were already bare. Their needles, like thin, short, golden hairs, kept floating down from above, although there was no wind. In the larch by my campfire a bird was chirruping; it was like some forest barber, snipping the needles with a click of his scissors and sprinkling them on my head, the river, and the campfire.

As I dried myself I gazed at the river. Whole islands of yellow leaves were floating downstream, catching against the snags and roots and coming to a stop, and new heaps of leaves piled up on them from behind. They dammed the river and then began to turn slowly; they tore themselves out of the clutches of the snags and floated away, now shining like gold when the sunlight fell on them, now smouldering and blackening when they passed through the shadows of the bushes.

The river had a few abandoned makeshift bridges left over from the battles with the Germans—rafts overgrown with rosebay and alder, and separate logs that had gone aground on the shallows. The water frothed around them.

A clump of bushes near my campfire began to crackle. Then a cow poked her wet head through the leaves. She sniffed the air, gave a noisy sigh and nodded her white head, with a black spot between the eyes, at me. At the same mo-



ment there was a sharp crack of a whip close by and someone shouted:

"Ho-ah there, Paraska! Where've you taken yourself to, you devil!"

Paraska jumped sideways, crashed through the brush and disappeared. A cowherd—a typical country boy, the like of whom you can find in any one of our villages—stepped out from behind the bushes. He was small, fair, wore a large peaked cap and a torn padded jacket, and carried a long whip that trailed behind him over the wet grass.

The boy snuffled, wiped his nose on his sleeve, which hung to the ground, looked at me, and said in a hoarse voice:

"Hello! The dew gets right under your skin. It's worn me all out."

"Sit down and dry yourself," I invited.

"That's an idea," he said. He came up and squatted by the fire. "Who're you, a traveller?"

"Something of the sort," I replied.

"I'm a cowherd," said the boy. "My name's Alexei Kudyshkin. Doing my father's job, I am. He's at the front. 'Course, I wanted to be a groom, but the collective-farm chairman wouldn't let me. Said I was undersized, too small. So he put Lyonya on the job. He's no groom, that Lyonya! I could pin him down easy if we got to wrestling in earnest. He's tall, all right, but he ain't got no strength. Because a man's strength is in his shoulders, and Lyonya's shoulders are as narrow as a goat's."

The boy paused, and then suddenly inquired:

"Ever seen the Mississippi? In America, that is?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to see it. They say it's broad, broader'n our Volga. Ever been in Stalingrad?"

"Yes."

The boy smiled.

"My Pop was wounded in Stalingrad and got a medal. He was our village herdsman before the war."

"Where did you get to know about the Mississippi?" I asked.

"In school. And from Pop. He knows everything, what every little blade of grass is called and where it grows, and



whether it's good or bad. He can explain everything. All about our country and about other countries. Is it true there are diamond hills, only deep below the ground, so that you've got to dig with machines for a hundred years to reach them?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I've never heard about such hills."

"But my Pop has!" exclaimed the boy. "He isn't a traveller, but he knows all about travelling. Heard about the bottles?"

"What bottles?"

"About the mail bottles."

"No."

"I'll tell you about them," said the boy. "A traveller, let's say, goes sailing on a ship. Across the ocean. But the sailors, naturally, start a mutiny, because they don't want to go out to sea. At home they've got plenty of food, and their stoves are heated all winter long, and they've got their own cows and vegetable gardens, and in the evenings they can visit their neighbours and play a game of cards. And what have they got on board ship? Nothing but hot weather and water. So they get up a mutiny, put the traveller in a rowboat and let him drift away by himself over the ocean. Then they turn sail and go back home. Meanwhile the ocean throws the traveller up on a desert island. Ever see a desert island?"

"No."

"We've got a few in our river," the boy said, his eyes shining and his face flushed with excitement. "An otter lives on one of them. Well, as I was saying, a wave throws him up on a desert island. There's nothing on it but moaning palm trees and parrots flapping about and cawing, and he can consider himself pretty lucky if he finds any fresh water in the place. He takes a bottle out of the rowboat, writes a note about being stranded on the island, stops up the bottle, and throws it into the ocean. The current carries it along, and then, of course, some ship or other picks it up and sends a radio message about this traveller needing help at once. And he gets saved. And afterwards those sailors get tried by an admiralty court."



"For mutiny?"

"That's right. And for cruelty."

"Alyoshka!" a woman's voice called angrily from the distance. "Where are you? Paraska's got into the cabbage patch!"

"Here I am!" cried the boy. "I'll chase her out in a jiffy!"

He stood up and wrapped his padded jacket about him.

"What a nuisance she is!" he said. "It's more trouble looking after Paraska than tending a whole herd of cows. Well, goodbye."

He ran off into the thicket. Soon I heard the crack of a whip in the distance, and the boy shouting, "Where do you think you're going to, you devil!" Then followed the grumpy moo of the cow.

I stamped out my fire and proceeded downstream. As I walked along, the river seemed to become more and more mysterious and beautiful. Here the steep banks were lined with a grey wall of aspens, and strands of yellow hop hung from the trees, looking for all the world like new bast put out to dry in the sun. There the hollow trunk of a willow spanned the river like a bridge, and around it little fishes frisked in the water. Here the river curved away majestically into the gold and blue autumn forest.

Here the water rippled briskly over the washed sands, there it lay very still, like a bottomless pool. The outlines of fumed oaks were vaguely visible at the bottom of the still pools. In one spot a slope all red with maples opened to view, and among the maples I saw an old chapel with a rusty dome.

At sundown I reached a country lane. It meandered alongside the river. Once again I came upon grass-grown rafts. From a distance they looked like islands. In the slanting rays of the sun I noticed a dazzling glitter on one of the rafts. I strained my eyes but could not make out what it was—a tin can or a bit of glass, or what.

I crossed over gingerly to the raft on a log, bent down, and found an ordinary beer bottle. Bindweed had entwined itself around the neck of the bottle. I picked it up and held it against the light. It was sealed with wax and there was something white inside—a letter folded triangularly.



I broke the neck and pulled out the letter. But I could not read it, for the writing was very faint, and dusk was deepening so rapidly that I could not even distinguish the uneven lines. I had to hurry if I wanted to reach the railroad line before dark. A chill smell of leaves floated up out of the thickets. In the clearings it was still faintly light. High in the sky a cloud glowed crimson.

The Moscow train arrived at night. After the desolate woods, the cold air and the solitude, the noisy, smoke-filled car seemed unusually cosy. I stretched out on an upper berth and began to read the letter. It was an old one. Judging by the date, which for some reason had been written in very large letters, it had lain in the bottle for about two years.

"Hello, Pop!" it said. "This is your son Alexei Kudyshkin writing you. While you're busy fighting at the front, we are getting along pretty well and are waiting for you to come back. Mom's working as herder, and I'm helping her. But I really want to be a groom. Because with cows you have to watch them all the time, and you can't see anything much that way. On a horse you can go wherever you like on business, but the cows got only one place to go to: Goreli Meadow and Mitina Grove. You can't see much there. And I want to see everything and know everything. I'd come down to Stalingrad to you on a raft, but Mom won't let me. Besides, you can't go to the front without a pass. Why don't you send for me to help bring up cartridges or do something else in the military line? I'd manage all right. And whenever there'd be a breathing spell in the fighting you could tell me all sorts of stories. I'm sending this letter in a bottle, like a traveller, because it's not interesting to send it by mail. Our river flows into the Volga and the bottle will certainly get there. Some Red Army man will pick it up, read the address and deliver it to you—that is, if the bottle isn't sunk by a mine or hit by a paddle wheel. The kids say that Stalingrad stretches forty-eight kilometres long and that there's fighting along every metre of it! I'm sending it in a bottle also because then Mom won't find it and begin to cry, because she hates Grandma or me to see her crying. That's how it is. We're expecting you to come back safe



and sound, and think of you every day. In which hopes I remain your loving son, Alexei.

"Petka, the miller's son, is a flyer already. They say he flew over our village and dipped his wings, only I didn't see it. There's lots of fish now in the pool near the oak stump—they keep churning up the river day and night. A stupid old fox went and stole a decoy duck by mistake out of Grandad Potap's storeroom. Grandad cursed for two days running. Please write back."

In Moscow I simply did not know what to do with the letter. Alexei's father's address had changed since, of course. So as not to disappoint the boy, I had to resort to a certain measure of deception. I sent him back the letter with a note saying that the bottle had been picked up in the Caspian Sea by the crew of the *Krasnovodsk* and was now being returned, since the Battle of Stalingrad had ended in victory long ago, and the addressee had advanced westward to gain further victories.



## BOYS

THE STATE forest preserve on the Usman river, near Voronezh, stands at the border of the Don steppes. The forest rustles faintly, and is cool and redolent of grasses, but just step out of it and a blast of heat, a dazzling glare, and the pungent odour of savory will hit you in the face; and the steppe, as far-reaching and windy as the sea, will spread before you to the very horizon.

You will see windmills flapping their sails atop hillocks, and kites, and scattered isles of old manorial gardens.

But first you will see the sky—the lofty sky of the steppes, with its immense blue-tinted clouds. There are many clouds, but they hardly ever blot out the sun. At times their shadows drift across the steppe, now here, now there. They drift so slowly that one may walk in their shade a long time without falling behind, taking shelter from the blazing sun.

There, in the steppe, at the bottom of a sloping ravine not far from an old linden park, glistens the little Kamenka river. It has almost run dry. Clear water, warmed by the sun, can be found only in small pools; water spiders scurry over the surface, and sleepy frogs squat on the riverbanks and pant—they just cannot draw in enough air in that scorching heat.

The linden park—it is pitted with smashed blindages overgrown with wild raspberry bushes—can be heard from afar. From dawn to dark it resounds with the whistling, chirping and twittering of myriads of tomtits, bullfinches, robins, orioles and siskins. The bird bazaar is never still



amid the tall lindens—so tall that to look up at them is enough to make one dizzy.

In the shade of the trees there nestles a little white house. It once belonged to the almost forgotten writer Ertel, a contemporary of Chekhov. Now it is a small House of Rest.

I had a bone to pick with the birds in the park. I would often go to the Kamenka early in the morning to fish. The moment I stepped into the park the birds in the boughs—hundreds of them—would bestir themselves, trying to hide, and send showers of dewdrops down upon my head. They would flap noisily out of the tangled branches and dart away into the depths of the park. It may have been a pretty sight, but, soaked as I was with dew, I was in no mood to appreciate it. I tried to walk ever so softly and noiselessly, but all to no avail. The more inconspicuously I approached a thicket swarming with birds, the greater was the commotion and the more abundant the shower of cold dew.

Finally I would reach the Kamenka. The sun would be rising and the bare steppe asparkle with dew. And not a soul around. Even the sharpest eye could not have detected the slightest sign of a human being. But no sooner did I fling my line into the water than a mob of very young, flaxen-haired, barefoot urchins would come streaming out of the ravine.

They would advance upon me from behind, in a large semicircle, and so cautiously that sometimes I became aware of their presence only from their concentrated breathing behind my back.

The urchins would stand there in silence, breathing hard and staring fixedly at the red floats. Now and again one of them would rub one foot against the other.

From long experience I knew that in such circumstances fish stop biting. It was inexplicable, but nevertheless true. Even a single boy staring at the float from behind my back was enough to close the biting session for good.

At first I decided to buy off the boys. I gave each of them a gilded fishhook on the condition that they go away



and leave me to my fishing. The boys took the hooks, whispered their thanks and conscientiously took their departure. But a half hour later a fresh crop of boys sprouted up. While still at a distance they shouted:

"Uncle, give us a fish hook!"

I realized that I had committed a fatal blunder.

Casting about for a sure way of getting rid of the boys, I recalled what the writer Gaidar had once told me. He had assured me that children are highly susceptible to mystifying prattle. And so, the next day, when the boys clustered round me again and began to breathe hard, and the fish stopped biting, I said in a gloomy voice, without looking around:

"Do you know, boys, that you'll have to pay a fine of a hundred rubles for that?"

"For what?" came the faltering voice of the liveliest of the lot.

"Just for that," I replied.

The boys looked at one another and, without taking their eyes off me, backed away slowly and gingerly. They backed away about thirty paces, and then spun around and bolted helter-skelter over the steppe. The smallest of them, trotting behind, stumbled and suddenly began to howl. The lively youngster seized him by the hand, gave him a whack, and dragged him away. The boys vanished.

I was no less amazed by what had taken place than the boys. I burst out laughing. From behind a willow bush someone giggled in reply.

I peered behind the bush. There, with their faces buried in the grass and their bodies shaking with laughter, lay two fair-haired boys with long rope whips.

"Why did you stay behind?"

"We can't go away," said the older of the two. "We're herders. Our herd is on the other side of that little hill over there."

"What if there weren't any herd?"

The boys grinned and stood up.

"No!" the same boy said. "We wouldn't have run anyway. We're big. And those kids are small. They'll swallow anything



you tell them. They're afraid of you now, and they won't come back for a long time."

Thus began my friendship with the herders Vitya and Fedya, and our unusual conversations.

"What are you, a writer?" Fedya asked me at once.

"Yes."

"Been one a long time?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't look like it," said Fedya, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Why?"

"The fish keep on biting and you miss them every time."

"You're mixing things up," I said. "What's the fish got to do with it?"

"Go on," remarked Fedya peevishly. "It's got to do plenty."

At this juncture the younger herder, Vitya, intervened.

"Last summer," he said, hurrying and choking on his words, "two writers fished here too. Uncle Zhora and Uncle Sasha. You should've seen Uncle Sasha swing his line—zoop! And did they bite! And did he jerk 'em out! He caught perch this big! Bigger'n your arm even! And one right after another. But Uncle Zhora couldn't fish for anything. He just couldn't. He used to sit there all day long and all he caught was a teeny-weeny little roach."

"Don't you butt in!" snapped Fedya. "You're a nut! Can't you understand that Uncle Zhora wasn't a writer at all? And Uncle Sasha—he was a writer! He wrote twenty books!"

Then it dawned on me. In Fedya's eyes a real writer was a legendary figure, a person of undoubted talent in all spheres. He was a sort of magician, a Master Jack-of-all-trades. He must know everything, see everything, understand everything and do everything remarkably well. I did not wish to shatter the little village herder's naive conception. Perhaps because behind this naiveté there lay hidden the real truth about the art of writing, the truth we do not keep in mind and towards the realization of which we do not always strive.



For some reason I felt ashamed. And I swore then and there never to bungle even in such a minor matter as fishing, especially in Fedya's presence. It became a matter of honour, as it were. Now, in Moscow, they strike me as being a little funny—those thoughts of mine while fishing in the Kamenka. But at the time I could not bear the thought of Fedya telling somebody: "Uncle Kostya? Why, he's no writer! He can't even hook a fish! His fish always get away!"

From then on I was very careful when Fedya was around. He had to know everything. He plied me with hundreds of questions, some of which, however, I was unable to answer. Like all herders, Fedya knew the names of various grasses, flowers and plants, and he liked to talk about them. I too knew something about plants, but here, near Voronezh, there were many herbs and flowers that do not grow in our part of Russia, farther north. Therefore I was glad I had thought of bringing a handbook on plants with me from Moscow.

I used to bring back armfuls of various flowers and grasses from the steppe, from the banks of the Usman and from the forest preserve, and sit down to classify them. Thus, gradually, thanks to Fedya, I plunged into the fascinating world of leaves, corollas, petals, stamens and spikes, into the world of plant odours and clear colours. My room soon resembled the abode of a village quack. Bunches of withered grass hung on the walls, and the medicinal smell of steppe plants became so all-pervading that even the scent of the flowering limes outside my window could not overpower it.

And then, at last, came my hour of triumph.

Along the banks of the Kamenka a fragile flower, the chickweed which resembles a little white star, was in blossom.

Once I came to the Kamenka at daybreak. Fedya was not long in appearing. He sat down next to me, reached into his pocket for a piece of bread, and began to munch it as he questioned me about this and that.

The sky was overcast. The bright floats lay motionless on the grey water. The fish were biting poorly.

I glanced at the chickweeds at my feet and noticed that they were all closed.



"It's going to rain," I told Fedya.

"How do you know?"

"The flowers say so."

I pointed out the closed flowers to him. Fedya wrinkled his brow and thought for a long time.

"Why do they close up before a rain?"

"So that the rain doesn't shake off the pollen."

I launched into a discourse about pollen and pollination, and about how you could tell the time of day by the flowers. While I was telling him all this, a roach bit on my line, but I fumbled it. Fedya did not even notice this. My story had intrigued him.

"Where did you learn all that?" he asked. "In school?"

"From books."

"Oh well, if I knew all that . . ." he drawled, and fell silent.

"What would you do? Stop herding cows? Go to Voronezh?"

"No!" said Fedya. "I like it here. When I grow up I'll become chairman of the collective farm instead of Silanty Petrovich, and I'll build hothouses and plant lots of flowers in the village. Ooh, the things I'll do! I'll start a honey factory even."

A lone drop of rain slanted down into the water. Faint ripples spread from it in circles. Then all at once the grass began to rustle and sigh, little circles broke out on the entire surface of the river, and a soft but distinct tinkle arose over the pool. A slow, warm rain was falling.

Far above, through gaps in the soft clouds, shone the broad rays of the sun, and the steppe steamed and sparkled. The grasses, the wheat and the earth gave off a more pungent aroma. From the other side of the hillock floated the smell of new milk—the herd was grazing there.

"Look," said Fedya. "The grass is like crystal!"

The fuzzy stems of the chickweeds were completely covered with raindrops. The little plants scintillated at our feet as though they really were made of crystal.

The tinkle hovering over the pool did not subside, and now it seemed as though not only the rain but all these crystal blades were tinkling.



There was nowhere to take shelter from the rain, so we covered our heads with Fedya's padded jacket and sat there.

"It's a golden summer," Fedya remarked gravely.

He must have picked up this expression from one of the old men of the village, probably from his own grandfather. The summer was indeed replete with an elusive golden substance, manifest in the light murmur of the rain, in the warmth of the rivers, in the faintly swaying myriads of wild flowers, in the scent of ripening wheat, that harbinger of the harvest.

1946









## EXPLANATORY

### THE GULF OF KARA-BUGAZ

*Aryks*—Irrigation ditches.

*Basmachi*—Brigands who during the Civil War participated in the counter-revolutionary bandit movement organized in Central Asia by the secret service of the foreign interventionists for the purpose of combatting Soviet power.

*Chigirs*—Water wheels with buckets attached, turned by man or oxen.

"Death Battalion"—The name given to picked Whiteguard units frequently dispatched on punitive expeditions.

*Ioldash*—Comrade.

*Karagachi*—Black tree in Turkmenian. A peculiar type of elm tree.

*Khabar bar?*—What's the news?

*Kizyak*—A fuel of dung and straw in the shape of bricks.

*Malakhai*—A tall fur-lined hat.

*Mussavatists*—Sympathizers or members of the Tyurk bourgeois-nationalist party ("Mussavat"), which was the chief counter-revolutionary force in the Civil War in Azerbaijan. The foreign interventionists supported the Mussavatists.

*Niva and Rodina*—Popular weekly illustrated journals issued in St. Petersburg.

*Pendinka*—An Oriental skin disease (Leishmaniosis).

*Saksaul*—A small tree growing in the Central Asian deserts and used as firewood.

*Ukrainian Kirill-Mefody Fraternity*—A secret society (founded in 1846) which played a big role in the revolutionary movement in the Ukraine. The great Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) was a member of the society. In 1847, the fraternity was discovered by the police. Part of its members were imprisoned and part exiled.

*Yomuds*—A tribe of cattle-breeding nomads inhabiting the western part of the Turkmen S.S.R.

### COLCHIS

*Bicho*—Boy.

*Duhan*—An eating place.

*Gaguimarjos*—Greetings! (Reply).



*Gamarjoba*—Greetings!  
*Habarda*—Look out! Danger!  
*Katso*—Man, friend.  
*Madlobeli*—Thank you.  
*Rambavia*—What's the racket?

## SNOW

*Nevidal*—In Russian the word means a wonder, a prodigy.

## BIOGRAPHICAL

ANTOKOLSKY, M. (1843-1902)—A prominent Russian sculptor.

BAGRITSKY, E. (1895-1934)—A well-known Soviet poet.

DAKHADAYEV, MAKHACH. (1879-1918)—An old revolutionary and Socialist who headed the revolutionary struggle of the working people of Daghestan during the Civil War. He was shot by the Whites.

HAFIZ (1300-1389)—A great Iranian poet.

PALLAS, P. (1741-1811)—Renowned naturalist and traveller. The explorer of many areas of European Russia and Siberia.

PISAREV, D. (1840-1868)—An eminent Russian critic and publicist.

PRZHEVALSKY, N. (1839-1888)—Well-known Russian geographer and explorer in the Far East and Central Asia.

ROZHESTVENSKY, Z. (1848-1909)—A Russian admiral. Commanded Russia's Second Pacific Fleet during the Russo-Japanese War.

SAVRASSOV, A. (1830-1897)—Well-known artist, one of the founders of realistic landscape painting in Russia.

SEMENOV-TYAN-SHANSKY, P. (1827-1914)—An eminent Russian geographer, traveller and statistician.

SHAMIL (1798-1871)—The leader of the Caucasian peoples in their Sacred War (*Gazavat*) against colonial oppression by tsarist Russia.

SHOLOKHOV, M. (born in 1905)—Outstanding Soviet writer. Author of the popular novels *And Quiet Flows the Don* and *Soil Upturned*.

TIKHONOV, N. (born 1896)—A prominent Russian prose writer and poet.



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